

Vespera Studia Critica (VSC)
Vol 1 No 1 October 2026, Hal 56-69
ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (Print) ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (Electronic)
Open Access: https://scriptaintelektual.com/scripta-humanika/index

Youth Exclusion from Work and Education: Gendered Patterns in Global Labour Statistics

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Article Info :
Received:
16-09-2026
Revised:
17-10-2026
Accepted:
25-10-2026

Abstract

Youth exclusion from employment, education, and training remains a persistent challenge despite improvements in global labour-market conditions following the COVID-19 pandemic. This study examines global trends in young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) during 2019–2023 and evaluates gender and economic disparities in 2023. A quantitative descriptive design employing comparative documentary analysis was applied to secondary statistical data published by the International Labour Organization. Five annual global NEET observations were examined using percentage-point differences, while gender and income-group disparities were assessed through absolute differences and prevalence ratios. Global NEET prevalence increased from 21.4% in 2019 to 23.2% in 2020 before declining to 20.4% in 2023, representing a 2.8-percentage-point reduction from its pandemic-period peak. In South Asia, female NEET prevalence reached 42.4%, compared with 11.5% among males, producing a 30.9-percentage-point gap. Low-income economies recorded a prevalence of 28.7%, compared with 10.4% in high-income economies, representing an 18.3-percentage-point difference. These findings demonstrate that aggregate labour-market recovery does not necessarily indicate equitable participation across population groups. The study highlights the importance of disaggregated monitoring for identifying persistent inequalities while acknowledging that aggregate statistics cannot establish causal mechanisms or intervention effectiveness.

Keywords: *Education-to-work transition; Gender inequality; Labour market; NEET; Youth*.

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INTRODUCTION

The persistence of youth exclusion from employment, education, and training represents a structural challenge to socioeconomic development, labour-market inclusion, and equitable transitions into adulthood. Although employment conditions have improved in several economies following the COVID-19 pandemic, aggregate recovery indicators do not necessarily reflect comparable improvements in access to productive opportunities across demographic and socioeconomic groups. International Labour Organization statistics indicate that the global proportion of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) increased from 21.4% in 2019 to 23.2% in 2020 before declining to 20.4% in 2023, illustrating both the immediate disruption associated with the pandemic and the subsequent reduction in measured exclusion (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). These changes nevertheless coexist with substantial inequalities, particularly among young women and populations living in economicall y disadvantaged regions. In South Asia, the reported NEET prevalence among young women reached 42.4% in 2023, compared with 11.5% among young men, while the corresponding rates across low-income and high-income economies were 28.7% and 10.4%, respectively (ILO, 2024). Such disparities suggest that declining global NEET prevalence cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of equitable educational or labour-market participation. Research on youth disengagement increasingly situates these patterns within broader processes of social exclusion, individual capability development, institutional accessibility, and uneven economic opportunity (Gunnes et al., 2025; Rahmani et al., 2024). The consequences of youth disconnection also extend beyond immediate employment outcomes because prolonged exclusion may influence subsequent occupational trajectories, social participation, and access to resources across the life course (Heglum & Nilsen, 2025; Stawska, 2022). Understanding global labour-market recovery

consequently requires analytical attention not only to changes in the overall prevalence of youth exclusion but also to the distribution of opportunities across gender, geographical, and economic divisions.

Contemporary scholarship on youth employment exclusion has developed through several complementary research traditions, including socioeconomic risk assessment, institutional analysis, educational transition research, and evaluations of interventions targeting disengaged young people. Systematic reviews and quantitative investigations have established NEET status as a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained through unemployment indicators or individual characteristics alone, highlighting the relevance of demographic circumstances, educational experiences, and wider socioeconomic conditions (Rahmani et al., 2024; Avanesian et al., 2024). A related literature examines transitions from education into employment as developmental processes shaped by institutional arrangements, career resources, occupational expectations, and access to supportive social relationships (Blokker et al., 2023; Marczuk, 2024; Ayvaz & Karacan-Özdemir, 2024). Research on networking, perceived employability, and educational pathways further broadens this analytical orientation by considering how young people's available resources and transition experiences may differ across social and educational environments (De Weerdt et al., 2024; Gunawan et al., 2025; Bowlus & Wong, 2024). Studies employing sequence-oriented and developmental approaches additionally emphasize the importance of distinguishing different pathways into employment rather than treating all non-employed young people as a homogeneous population (Ngai et al., 2024; Thouin et al., 2023). Another strand of scholarship concentrates on educational support, self-directed learning, and career development as potential components of responses to youth disengagement (Kõiv & Saks, 2023, 2024; Ripamonti, 2025). Intervention-oriented research complements these approaches by examining the institutional and practical conditions under which employment-related support may become accessible and meaningful for vulnerable populations (Holliman et al., 2023; Su et al., 2024; Marques et al., 2025). The resulting state of the art therefore provides a diversified understanding of youth exclusion, encompassing individual resources, institutional conditions, transition pathways, and support mechanisms, while indicating that the interpretation of NEET prevalence requires attention to the wider social organization of educational and employment opportunities.

Despite these advances, several limitations remain in the relationship between existing explanations of youth disengagement and the comparative interpretation of international labour-market statistics. Research explicitly addressing gender differences establishes the relevance of institutional arrangements, demographic characteristics, and regional conditions, but its analytical scope is frequently tied to particular populations or geographical settings (Odoardi et al., 2023; Kang & Youn, 2024; Özkan Değirmenci, 2026). Contextual investigations of gendered transitions, including research situated in Indonesia, likewise demonstrate the relevance of examining how exclusion is embedded in specific social environments rather than assuming that the determinants of disengagement operate identically across populations (Faizah et al., 2026). Studies examining vulnerable young people's economic practices, social experiences, and pathways beyond NEET status contribute further conceptual differentiation, although these research orientations address questions that are distinct from descriptive comparisons of internationally harmonized statistical indicators (Curty et al., 2026; Gustavsson & Jonsson, 2024; Willhardt, 2026). Analyses of employment preferences and historically differentiated patterns of youth disconnection also underline the importance of population characteristics and temporal circumstances when interpreting labour-market participation (Woodgate et al., 2025; Wang & Hong, 2026). These contributions expose a methodological distinction between explaining individual pathways into NEET status and evaluating whether aggregate improvements in youth participation are accompanied by narrower inequalities across population groups. The former requires evidence concerning individual experiences, institutional mechanisms, or longitudinal transitions, whereas the latter can initially be examined through consistent comparisons of published population-level indicators. Existing research therefore provides substantial evidence concerning particular dimensions of youth exclusion, but the studies considered here do not collectively establish whether the post-pandemic decline in global NEET prevalence corresponds to equitable participation across gender and country-income categories. The research gap addressed in this article is consequently a bounded descriptive and interpretative gap: the need to connect a consistent global NEET trajectory with explicitly differentiated gender and

economic comparisons while preserving the distinction between observed population disparities and their unverified causal explanations. This gap does not imply an absence of international NEET statistics or previous comparative research; it concerns the systematic integration and interpretation of selected indicators within a transparent and reproducible analytical framework.

The scientific significance of this gap lies in the possibility that interpretations based predominantly on aggregate recovery statistics may obscure persistent inequalities in young people's access to education, training, and employment. An improvement in global NEET prevalence can coexist with comparatively high exclusion among particular demographic groups, making it necessary to distinguish population-wide trends from the distribution of those trends across social categories. Research on institutional inequalities in education-to-work transitions provides a relevant conceptual basis for recognizing that labour-market participation is shaped by unequal access to opportunities rather than by individual occupational readiness alone (Gewirtz et al., 2025; Marczuk, 2024). The persistence of gender-related differences also creates a policy concern because programmes designed around average youth employment conditions may be insufficiently responsive to populations experiencing distinct constraints on educational participation, occupational mobility, and access to formal work (Odoardi et al., 2023; Kang & Youn, 2024). At the same time, the literature on intervention development cautions against treating the identification of disadvantaged populations as evidence that any specific employment or training intervention will necessarily be effective (Marques et al., 2025; Su et al., 2024). Policy interpretation therefore requires an explicit distinction between diagnosing the distribution of exclusion and estimating the effects of measures intended to reduce it. Educational support and career-development initiatives similarly need to be assessed in relation to the circumstances of their intended beneficiaries, particularly where difficulties in navigating institutional transitions may affect sustained participation (Holliman et al., 2023; Ripamonti, 2025). Without disaggregated interpretation, reductions in global NEET rates could encourage overly generalized assessments of recovery, obscure the concentration of exclusion within disadvantaged groups, and weaken the empirical basis for identifying priorities in youth employment and educational policy. A carefully delimited comparative analysis offers practical value by clarifying the magnitude and direction of observable disparities, while its scientific contribution lies in maintaining conceptual consistency between the statistical evidence available and the interpretations that such evidence can support.

The present study is positioned at the intersection of international labour-market monitoring, comparative social inequality analysis, and research on education-to-work transitions. Its contribution differs from studies primarily concerned with psychological characteristics, employability resources, self-directed learning, or specific intervention mechanisms because it examines published population-level indicators rather than generating individual-level explanatory models (Avanesian et al., 2024; Kõiv & Saks, 2024; Gunawan et al., 2025). It also differs from longitudinal or sequence-based investigations that reconstruct individual employment trajectories, since the present analysis is restricted to annual global indicators and selected cross-sectional population comparisons (Heglum & Nilsen, 2025; Ngai et al., 2024). The proposed analytical contribution consists of integrating three complementary dimensions within a single descriptive framework: the annual global NEET trajectory during 2019–2023, the female–male disparity reported for South Asia in 2023, and the difference between low-income and high-income economies in the same year. This design provides a focused basis for distinguishing temporal recovery from distributive inequality without treating geographically distinct comparisons as equivalent observations or attributing differences to unmeasured individual and institutional mechanisms. Comparative research on gender-related exclusion and regional disparities establishes the relevance of differentiated population analysis, while international evidence on NEET risk factors supports caution against inferring causality from aggregate patterns (Odoardi et al., 2023; Rahmani et al., 2024; Özkan Değirmenci, 2026). The study's novelty is therefore primarily analytical and methodological rather than theoretical or data-generative: it provides an integrated, reproducible comparison of selected temporal and distributional indicators derived from a common international statistical framework, accompanied by explicit restrictions on the interpretation of percentage-point differences and prevalence ratios. This contribution should not be understood as the discovery of previously undocumented disparities or the development of a new theory of youth exclusion. Instead, it offers a transparent synthesis of established statistical evidence to clarify how

global labour-market recovery and continuing inequality can be evaluated as related but analytically distinct phenomena.

This study aims to examine changes in global youth exclusion from employment, education, and training during 2019–2023 and to assess selected gender and economic disparities using published international labour statistics. Specifically, the analysis seeks to identify the direction and magnitude of annual changes in global NEET prevalence, quantify the difference between female and male NEET rates in South Asia in 2023, and compare the corresponding prevalence levels across low-income and high-income economies. The research employs a comparative documentary design based on official aggregate indicators and applies descriptive calculations, including percentage-point differences and prevalence ratios, without generating individual-level observations or inferential estimates. Its scientific contribution lies in establishing an integrated account of temporal change and population-level inequality that preserves the distinction between aggregate recovery, unequal participation, and the causal processes that cannot be identified from the available data. Its methodological contribution consists of a reproducible approach to secondary statistical comparison that maintains consistency in indicator interpretation and acknowledges differences in population coverage. The practical contribution is to provide an empirical basis for identifying disparities that warrant closer policy attention in education-to-work transitions and youth employment inclusion. The study ultimately seeks to determine whether the observed decline in global NEET prevalence can be interpreted as sufficient evidence of improved equality of opportunity or whether substantial differences across gender and economic groups require a more differentiated assessment of post-pandemic labour-market recovery.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design using secondary data and a comparative documentary approach to examine global trends in youth exclusion from employment, education, and training. The analysis was based on publicly available statistical information published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024, including its accompanying statistical tables and regional documentation. The temporal scope covered five consecutive years, from 2019 to 2023, allowing comparison of youth labour-market conditions before, during, and after the initial disruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary unit of analysis was the aggregate proportion of young people classified as not in employment, education, or training (NEET), expressed as a percentage of the corresponding youth population. The dataset consisted of five annual global NEET observations, supplemented by disaggregated indicators for female and male youth in South Asia and aggregate NEET rates for low-income and high-income economies in 2023. These indicators were selected according to their direct relevance to the research objectives and their availability within the specified ILO publications. Data collection involved documentary extraction of published statistical estimates without administering questionnaires, conducting interviews, recruiting participants, or generating additional observations. The research did not employ probability sampling because its analytical material comprised selected published aggregate indicators rather than a sample of individual respondents. The original statistical definitions, geographical classifications, observation periods, and population denominators were retained to preserve consistency with the source documentation. Accordingly, the study was restricted to describing documented population-level patterns and did not seek to estimate individual determinants of NEET status or establish causal relationships between demographic characteristics and labour-market exclusion.

Data processing and analysis were conducted through descriptive statistical comparisons of the published indicators. The temporal analysis examined annual changes in global NEET prevalence by subtracting the preceding year's percentage from the subsequent year's percentage, with the resulting differences expressed in percentage points. The analysis also compared the 2019 baseline with the 2023 observation to assess the direction and magnitude of change over the complete study period. Gender disparities were examined using the published female and male NEET rates for South Asia in 2023, calculating both the absolute percentage-point difference and the female-to-male prevalence ratio. Economic disparities were assessed by subtracting the reported NEET prevalence in high-income economies from that in low-income economies for the same year. The results were organized into descriptive tables and a graphical representation of the annual global trajectory to facilitate

interpretation of temporal changes and differences between population groups. Analytical accuracy was addressed by retaining the reported source values, distinguishing percentage-point differences from relative ratios, and avoiding the combination of geographically distinct aggregate observations into artificial individual-level datasets. Comparisons were interpreted according to their respective population denominators and geographical coverage, recognizing that global, regional, and country-income classifications do not represent identical populations. No inferential hypothesis testing, regression modelling, statistical significance estimation, or causal identification procedure was undertaken because the available data consisted of selected published aggregate estimates without the individual observations or uncertainty measures required for such analyses. The interpretation was consequently limited to the direction, magnitude, and distribution of observed NEET indicators, while acknowledging that aggregate statistics cannot independently establish the influence of household circumstances, educational experiences, institutional conditions, or labour-market regulations on individual transitions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Post-Pandemic Trends in Youth Disconnection

The global trajectory of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) between 2019 and 2023 reveals a measurable disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic followed by a gradual reduction in the prevalence of youth disconnection. International Labour Organization statistics indicate that the global NEET rate increased from 21.4% in 2019 to 23.2% in 2020, representing a deterioration of 1.8 percentage points during the initial pandemic period (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). This increase establishes a distinct interruption in the observed temporal series, although the aggregate data do not permit the contribution of individual economic or institutional mechanisms to be isolated. The observed pattern is consistent with research emphasizing the sensitivity of education-to-work transitions to changes in economic conditions, institutional accessibility, and the availability of employment opportunities (Blokker et al., 2023; Marczuk, 2024).

The subsequent decline in global NEET prevalence indicates a progressive improvement in the aggregate indicator after its 2020 peak. Published estimates recorded rates of 21.8% in 2021, 20.9% in 2022, and 20.4% in 2023, corresponding to a cumulative reduction of 2.8 percentage points from 2020 to 2023 (ILO, 2024). The 2023 estimate was also 1.0 percentage point below the 2019 baseline, demonstrating that the reduction was not limited to a return to the pre-pandemic level. Nevertheless, a lower aggregate prevalence does not establish whether young people experienced more secure employment, improved educational participation, or sustained transitions into economically productive activities, distinctions that remain relevant in research on youth disengagement (Gunnes et al., 2025; Rahmani et al., 2024).

The temporal series provides a descriptive basis for evaluating the magnitude and direction of post-pandemic change without introducing assumptions about individual employment histories. The annual observations were extracted from the same institutional statistical framework, allowing differences between consecutive years to be expressed consistently in percentage points (ILO, 2024). Table 1 presents the five published global NEET rates and the corresponding annual changes calculated from the reported values. The separation between published indicators and derived changes is necessary to distinguish original statistical observations from arithmetic calculations performed for this study.

Table 1. Global Youth NEET Prevalence and Annual Changes, 2019–2023

Year	Global NEET rate (%)	Annual change (percentage points)
2019	21.4	—
2020	23.2	+1.8
2021	21.8	−1.4
2022	20.9	−0.9
2023	20.4	−0.5

Source: International Labour Organization (2024)

The values in Table 1 reveal that the largest annual movement occurred between 2019 and 2020, when global NEET prevalence increased by 1.8 percentage points. The subsequent reductions were not uniform, with a decrease of 1.4 percentage points in 2021, followed by smaller declines of 0.9 percentage points in 2022 and 0.5 percentage points in 2023. This sequence indicates that the pace of improvement moderated during the later observations, although five annual measurements are insufficient to establish a persistent structural trend or predict future developments. Research examining youth disconnection across economic conditions similarly emphasizes the importance of temporal variation when interpreting changes in young people's labour-market participation (Wang & Hong, 2026; Bowlus & Wong, 2024).

The interpretation of these changes also depends on distinguishing NEET prevalence from conventional youth unemployment statistics. The ILO reported a global youth unemployment rate of approximately 13% in 2023, but this indicator refers to the youth labour force rather than the broader youth population used as the denominator for NEET prevalence (ILO, 2024). Directly comparing the two percentages as equivalent measures would obscure the distinction between unemployment among economically active young people and exclusion from employment, education, and training among the wider youth population. This measurement distinction reinforces the argument that labour-market integration involves multiple institutional pathways and cannot be assessed solely through open unemployment (Marczuk, 2024; Blokker et al., 2023).

A further interpretative limitation concerns the heterogeneous circumstances included within the NEET classification. Young people temporarily transitioning between education and employment are counted within the same broad category as individuals experiencing prolonged disconnection, even though these circumstances may differ substantially in their duration and consequences. Longitudinal research on NEET trajectories and analyses of school-to-work sequences demonstrate the analytical importance of distinguishing transitional experiences from persistent exclusion (Heglum & Nilsen, 2025; Ngai et al., 2024). The present aggregate series cannot identify the proportion of young people entering, leaving, or remaining within NEET status across consecutive years, restricting its conclusions to changes in population-level prevalence rather than individual transition dynamics.

The decline in global NEET prevalence must also be evaluated against the distinction between numerical participation and the quality of opportunities available to young people. An individual leaving NEET status through employment is no longer included in the indicator, but the published aggregate percentage does not establish whether the resulting work provides adequate earnings, occupational security, or prospects for sustainable career development. Research on career transitions and employment preferences indicates that the characteristics of work and the resources available during occupational entry constitute relevant dimensions of labour-market integration beyond employment status alone (Ayvaz & Karacan-Özdemir, 2024; Woodgate et al., 2025). Consequently, the observed reduction in NEET prevalence provides evidence of a smaller proportion of youth outside employment, education, and training, but it cannot independently establish improvements in the substantive quality of their economic participation.

The temporal findings also have implications for interpreting the relationship between pandemic-related disruption and subsequent labour-market recovery. Research examining the experiences of young people in NEET circumstances during the pandemic draws attention to the social dimensions of disconnection that may not be captured through annual prevalence statistics (Gustavsson & Jonsson, 2024). Educational support systems, individual career-development resources, and institutional opportunities may influence transition experiences, but their specific contributions cannot be quantified using the five global observations available in this study. The descriptive evidence supports the narrower conclusion that the aggregate prevalence of youth exclusion decreased after 2020, without establishing whether the underlying barriers identified in the broader literature diminished at comparable rates (Holliman et al., 2023; Ripamonti, 2025).

The principal analytical implication of the 2019–2023 series is that post-pandemic improvement can be established at the aggregate level without demonstrating an equivalent reduction in inequality across population groups. Although the global NEET rate reached 20.4% in 2023, that observation represents a population average and does not reveal how educational and employment opportunities were distributed by gender, region, or national income classification (ILO, 2024). Research on equitable school-to-work transitions emphasizes the relevance of institutional and social differences when interpreting opportunities available to disadvantaged young people (Gewirtz et al.,

2025). The global trajectory therefore establishes the temporal foundation for a differentiated assessment of youth disconnection, while the interpretation of substantive inclusion requires examination of the demographic and economic disparities reported within the same international statistical framework.

Gender and Regional Gaps in Youth Exclusion

Gender disparities in youth exclusion reveal a distributional dimension of labour-market inequality that remains concealed when NEET prevalence is evaluated exclusively through global averages. The International Labour Organization reported that approximately two-thirds of young people classified as NEET worldwide were women in 2023, indicating a substantial gender imbalance in the composition of the excluded youth population (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). This distribution does not establish that gender independently determines exclusion, but it demonstrates the importance of examining participation patterns beyond aggregate employment indicators. Research on gender-related NEET disparities identifies institutional conditions, demographic characteristics, and labour-market structures as relevant dimensions for understanding unequal transitions into productive activity (Odoardi et al., 2023; Kang & Youn, 2024). The distinction between the numerical composition of the NEET population and gender-specific prevalence rates is particularly important because each indicator answers a different question concerning the distribution of exclusion.

The regional evidence from South Asia provides a more differentiated assessment of gender inequality through population-specific NEET prevalence rates. Published ILO estimates for 2023 recorded a female NEET rate of 42.4%, compared with 11.5% among young men, establishing an absolute gender difference of 30.9 percentage points (ILO, 2024). Dividing the female prevalence by the male prevalence produces a descriptive ratio of approximately 3.69, indicating that the reported NEET prevalence among young women was nearly 3.7 times the corresponding rate among young men. This ratio represents a comparison between two population-level estimates rather than an experimentally derived risk ratio or a measure of the causal effect of gender. Research examining gendered transitions among Indonesian youth and institutionally differentiated NEET risks supports the broader analytical relevance of considering social arrangements alongside observed statistical inequalities (Faizah et al., 2026; Kang & Youn, 2024).

The magnitude of the South Asian gender difference warrants examination alongside the economic disparities reported across country-income classifications. The ILO estimated that 28.7% of young people in low-income economies were classified as NEET in 2023, compared with 10.4% in high-income economies, yielding an absolute difference of 18.3 percentage points (ILO, 2024). These estimates describe distinct aggregate populations and should not be interpreted as direct comparisons between otherwise equivalent individuals or countries. Table 2 presents the original prevalence indicators together with the descriptive contrasts calculated from the published values, enabling a transparent distinction between gender-specific regional disparities and differences associated with economic classification.

Table 2. Gender and Country-Income Disparities in Youth NEET Prevalence, 2023

Population category	NEET rate (%)	Comparative indicator
South Asia – Female youth	42.4	Gender gap: 30.9 pp
South Asia – Male youth	11.5	Female-to-male ratio: 3.69
Low-income economies – Total youth	28.7	Income-group gap: 18.3 pp
High-income economies – Total youth	10.4	Low-to-high income ratio: 2.76

Source: International Labour Organization (2024).

The figures in Table 2 demonstrate that both gender and economic classifications are associated with pronounced differences in the observed prevalence of youth exclusion. The female-to-male NEET ratio in South Asia was approximately 3.69, while the ratio between low-income and high-income economies was approximately 2.76, although these contrasts involve different geographical and demographic populations. Their numerical magnitudes cannot be used to conclude that gender inequality is inherently more influential than national income conditions because the underlying

classifications, population structures, and comparison groups are not equivalent. Comparative research on NEET disparities emphasizes that institutional arrangements and regional characteristics may shape the relationship between demographic attributes and labour-market participation (Özkan Değirmenci, 2026; Odoardi et al., 2023). The principal implication of the table is the persistence of substantial population-level inequalities rather than the identification of a single dominant determinant of youth exclusion.

The particularly high female NEET prevalence in South Asia raises questions concerning the relationship between educational participation, employment access, and gender-differentiated social responsibilities. Gendered expectations surrounding household activities, caregiving, mobility, and employment participation represent possible explanatory mechanisms, but the aggregate indicators used in this study contain no direct measurements of these circumstances. Research on gendered youth transitions demonstrates the relevance of examining the interaction between social expectations and institutional opportunities, while comparative analyses of NEET risk indicate that demographic inequalities may differ according to the surrounding institutional environment (Faizah et al., 2026; Kang & Youn, 2024). These contributions provide a basis for identifying plausible avenues of further investigation without establishing which mechanisms account for the observed South Asian disparity. The available evidence therefore supports a strong descriptive statement concerning unequal NEET prevalence but does not justify attributing the 30.9-percentage-point difference to particular household, cultural, or labour-market factors.

The economic contrast between low-income and high-income economies introduces an additional dimension of structural differentiation in opportunities for young people. The 18.3-percentage-point prevalence gap indicates that the proportion of youth outside employment, education, and training was substantially greater within the reported low-income classification, although this comparison does not control for differences in educational systems, demographic composition, or employment structures (ILO, 2024). Literature on school-to-work transitions identifies institutional organization and access to employment-related resources as relevant elements of the broader conditions under which young people enter the labour market (Marczuk, 2024; De Weerdt et al., 2024). An income-group classification, however, cannot serve as a direct measurement of these institutional characteristics, particularly because countries within the same classification may differ considerably. The observed economic disparity is consequently more appropriately interpreted as evidence of unequal aggregate participation than as proof that national income status independently causes youth disconnection.

Gender and economic inequalities also require analytical separation from the individual-level characteristics frequently examined in research on NEET status. Studies addressing non-cognitive skills, educational self-direction, and perceived employability investigate dimensions of personal resources that may be associated with young people's capacity to navigate educational and occupational transitions (Avanesian et al., 2024; Kõiv & Saks, 2023; Gunawan et al., 2025). Such research provides useful conceptual explanations for variation in transition experiences, but its individual-level findings cannot be transferred directly to the aggregate comparisons presented in Table 2. Inferring individual characteristics from population-level prevalence differences would introduce an ecological interpretation problem because the relevant personal attributes were neither observed nor measured in the ILO indicators used here. The distinction reinforces the need for analytical restraint when integrating demographic statistics with explanatory literature that employs different units of observation.

The coexistence of gender and economic disparities suggests that youth exclusion should be examined through differentiated policy priorities rather than uniform interpretations of labour-market recovery. Research on equitable educational transitions highlights the importance of identifying institutional barriers faced by young people whose educational and occupational pathways differ from those assumed by conventional employment policies (Gewirtz et al., 2025). Intervention research similarly emphasizes that support mechanisms require consideration of population circumstances, programme design, and implementation conditions before their effectiveness can be established (Marques et al., 2025; Su et al., 2024). The present estimates identify demographic and economic populations with comparatively elevated NEET prevalence, but they provide no direct evidence concerning the effects of childcare provision, vocational training, employment subsidies, or other potential interventions. Their policy relevance rests on identifying measurable disparities that warrant

targeted investigation and subsequent evaluation rather than demonstrating the effectiveness of particular policy instruments.

The comparative findings establish that the reduction in global NEET prevalence cannot be treated as sufficient evidence of equitable access to education and employment opportunities. The South Asian female–male difference of 30.9 percentage points and the low-income versus high-income difference of 18.3 percentage points document substantial inequalities within the selected 2023 population classifications, although they do not reveal whether these specific disparities widened or narrowed during 2019–2023 (ILO, 2024). Research on life-course exclusion and differentiated school-to-work pathways further indicates the value of examining the persistence and duration of disengagement rather than relying exclusively on cross-sectional prevalence measures (Heglum & Nilsen, 2025; Ngai et al., 2024). The present analysis contributes a reproducible account of observed gender and economic contrasts while preserving the limitations imposed by differences in population coverage and the absence of individual-level information. These results provide an empirical foundation for evaluating the implications of disaggregated NEET monitoring and the methodological requirements of future research on unequal youth transitions.

Policy Interpretation and Research Limitations

The persistence of gender and economic disparities in youth exclusion raises questions about the adequacy of policy assessments based predominantly on aggregate labour-market recovery indicators. Although the global NEET prevalence declined between 2020 and 2023, the available statistics demonstrate that substantial differences remained across the selected demographic and economic categories in 2023 (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). These observations indicate that improvements in population-wide participation cannot independently establish whether employment and educational opportunities have become more equitable. Research on school-to-work transitions emphasizes the relevance of institutional arrangements, socioeconomic circumstances, and differentiated access to career-development resources when assessing the conditions under which young people enter employment (Blokker et al., 2023; Marczuk, 2024). Policy interpretation must consequently distinguish between reducing the measured prevalence of disconnection and addressing the conditions associated with unequal access to sustainable educational and occupational pathways.

The first policy implication concerns the importance of retaining disaggregated indicators within youth employment monitoring systems. The global NEET rate declined by 2.8 percentage points between 2020 and 2023, yet the 2023 statistics separately documented a 30.9-percentage-point gender difference in South Asia and an 18.3-percentage-point difference between low-income and high-income economies (ILO, 2024). These findings demonstrate that aggregate and disaggregated measures provide distinct information about labour-market participation, although the available data cannot establish whether the reported subgroup inequalities increased or decreased throughout the observation period. Research on gender-related NEET risks further supports the analytical relevance of institutional and demographic differentiation rather than treating youth exclusion as a uniform socioeconomic condition (Odoardi et al., 2023; Kang & Youn, 2024). Monitoring frameworks that distinguish temporal changes from population-specific disparities can provide a more informative descriptive foundation for identifying policy priorities without implying that the observed statistical differences establish their underlying causes.

The relationship between global recovery and distributional inequality can be clarified through the principal descriptive comparisons generated from the published ILO indicators. The calculations retain the original population classifications and express changes in percentage points to prevent confusion between absolute differences and relative prevalence ratios (ILO, 2024). Table 3 consolidates the temporal and cross-sectional contrasts relevant to evaluating the scope of the observed recovery and the inequalities that remain identifiable within the available evidence. The comparisons are descriptive rather than inferential, and their interpretation is restricted to the populations and observation periods represented by the underlying statistics.

Table 3. Descriptive Comparisons of Global Recovery and Youth NEET Disparities

Comparative indicator	Reference period	Calculated difference
Global NEET prevalence, 2019–2020	Pre-pandemic to initial pandemic period	+1.8 pp
Global NEET prevalence, 2020–2023	Post-2020 recovery period	−2.8 pp
Global NEET prevalence, 2019–2023	Complete observation period	−1.0 pp
South Asian female–male NEET difference	2023	30.9 pp
Low-income versus high-income NEET difference	2023	18.3 pp

Source: Authors' calculations based on International Labour Organization (2024). pp = percentage points.

The comparisons in Table 3 establish two analytically distinct dimensions of youth labour-market participation: temporal change in global prevalence and cross-sectional inequality between selected population categories. The reduction of 2.8 percentage points between 2020 and 2023 demonstrates improvement in the aggregate NEET indicator, whereas the gender and income-group differences identify substantial inequalities at the end of the observation period. The table does not establish that these inequalities persisted at the same magnitude throughout 2019–2023 because equivalent annual subgroup observations were not included in the analytical dataset. Research on differentiated youth transitions and life-course exclusion provides a rationale for examining whether changes in aggregate prevalence correspond to shifts in the duration and distribution of disengagement, questions that require longitudinal or repeated disaggregated observations (Heglum & Nilsen, 2025; Ngai et al., 2024). The methodological distinction between temporal and cross-sectional evidence prevents the observed improvement in the global indicator from being interpreted as proof of convergence between disadvantaged and comparatively advantaged populations.

A second policy consideration concerns the relationship between educational access, occupational preparation, and the characteristics of employment opportunities available to young people. NEET prevalence identifies the proportion of youth outside three major forms of participation but does not indicate whether those entering employment obtain stable working conditions, sufficient earnings, or opportunities for sustained occupational development. Research on career resources, self-directed learning, and employability highlights the relevance of capabilities and institutional support during education-to-work transitions, although these characteristics cannot be measured directly through the aggregate indicators examined here (Ayvaz & Karacan-Özdemir, 2024; Kõiv & Saks, 2023; Gunawan et al., 2025). Evaluations of youth inclusion policies should consequently distinguish improvements in participation status from changes in the quality and durability of labour-market integration. The available statistical evidence provides a basis for identifying broad patterns of disconnection but cannot determine whether particular educational, training, or employment programmes improved the quality of young people's subsequent opportunities.

Gender-sensitive policy interpretation requires particular caution because population-level disparities do not identify the mechanisms responsible for unequal participation. The substantially higher female NEET prevalence reported for South Asia establishes a descriptive inequality, but the dataset contains no direct measurements of unpaid caregiving, household decision-making, occupational discrimination, mobility restrictions, or access to childcare services (ILO, 2024). Research on gendered youth transitions and regional variation provides a rationale for examining such institutional and social conditions through appropriately designed individual-level investigations rather than inferring their effects from aggregate prevalence differences (Faizah et al., 2026; Özkan Değirmenci, 2026). Evidence concerning career support and targeted interventions likewise indicates the need to evaluate how programmes operate among their intended populations before drawing conclusions about effectiveness (Su et al., 2024; Marques et al., 2025). The observed gender disparity therefore identifies a population requiring closer analytical attention without establishing which specific intervention would produce the greatest reduction in exclusion.

The economic differences documented across country-income groups introduce additional limitations for transferring policy conclusions between national settings. A higher aggregate NEET prevalence among low-income economies may coexist with substantial variation in educational institutions, labour-market organization, demographic composition, and opportunities for employment within the same income classification. Comparative research on school-to-work institutions and analyses of equitable vocational pathways emphasize the relevance of these contextual differences when interpreting young people's access to employment and training (Marczuk, 2024; Gewirtz et al., 2025). The current dataset, however, does not include country-specific observations or institutional variables capable of distinguishing these potential influences. Policy recommendations derived from the income-group comparison must consequently remain limited to identifying differences in aggregate exclusion and the need for context-sensitive investigation, rather than prescribing uniform interventions for economically heterogeneous countries.

Several methodological constraints also delimit the scientific conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis. The study relies exclusively on published ILO aggregate estimates, comprising five annual global NEET observations and selected gender-specific and income-group indicators for 2023, without access to the individual records underlying those estimates. Such data permit transparent arithmetic comparisons but do not support estimation of individual risk factors, statistical significance, causal effects, or differences in the duration of NEET experiences. Research examining multidimensional NEET risk factors, occupational trajectories, and population heterogeneity demonstrates the relevance of more detailed evidence for investigating processes that aggregate indicators cannot resolve (Rahmani et al., 2024; Gunnes et al., 2025; Wang & Hong, 2026). The absence of uncertainty measures within the selected analytical data also prevents assessment of the statistical precision of the calculated subgroup differences. These restrictions are particularly relevant because descriptive prevalence ratios should not be interpreted as adjusted associations or causal estimates when population characteristics and institutional circumstances remain unobserved.

The study's contribution lies in providing a reproducible distinction between post-pandemic improvement in global youth participation and the substantial demographic and economic inequalities observable in the selected international indicators. Its results support the use of disaggregated monitoring as an analytical complement to aggregate NEET prevalence, while the absence of individual-level and longitudinal evidence limits conclusions about the mechanisms, persistence, and consequences of exclusion. Research on vulnerable youth transitions, employment preferences, and trajectories beyond NEET status indicates several directions through which future investigations could extend the present analysis, particularly by linking participation measures with individual experiences and employment quality (Thouin et al., 2023; Woodgate et al., 2025; Willhardt, 2026). Subsequent research could examine repeated gender- and income-disaggregated observations, incorporate harmonized individual-level survey data, and evaluate employment or educational interventions using designs capable of addressing selection effects and contextual variation. The present findings establish a bounded empirical basis for distinguishing measurable labour-market recovery from equality of opportunity, without claiming that descriptive differences identify the institutional or individual processes responsible for youth exclusion.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that global youth exclusion from employment, education, and training declined following the initial disruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, although substantial demographic and economic inequalities remained evident in the available 2023 indicators. Global NEET prevalence increased from 21.4% in 2019 to 23.2% in 2020 before decreasing to 20.4% in 2023, representing a reduction of 2.8 percentage points from the pandemic-period peak and 1.0 percentage point from the pre-pandemic baseline. The gender comparison in South Asia revealed a 30.9-percentage-point difference between young women (42.4%) and young men (11.5%), corresponding to a female-to-male prevalence ratio of approximately 3.69. A further disparity of 18.3 percentage points was identified between low-income economies (28.7%) and high-income economies (10.4%). These results establish that improvements in aggregate youth participation do not necessarily indicate equitable access to employment, education, and training across population groups. The study contributes to the literature by integrating temporal changes and selected distributional indicators within a transparent comparative framework, thereby distinguishing

measurable labour-market recovery from the persistence of population-level disparities without attributing observed differences to unverified causal mechanisms.

The findings support the incorporation of gender-disaggregated, regionally differentiated, and income-sensitive indicators into the evaluation of youth employment and educational inclusion policies. Aggregate reductions in NEET prevalence should be interpreted alongside population-specific disparities to identify groups requiring further investigation and more differentiated policy attention. The analysis also indicates that monitoring participation status alone cannot establish the quality, stability, or sustainability of employment and educational transitions. Its methodological contribution consists of applying reproducible descriptive comparisons while preserving differences in population coverage, statistical denominators, and the interpretation of percentage-point changes and prevalence ratios. The reliance on published aggregate indicators limits the ability to examine individual circumstances, assess the persistence of subgroup inequalities over time, or determine the effectiveness of particular interventions. Future investigations should incorporate repeated disaggregated observations and harmonized individual-level evidence to examine the mechanisms underlying youth exclusion and evaluate the outcomes of targeted educational and employment policies.

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