

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FACED BY THE YOUNG GENERATION INVOLVED IN TRADE UNIONS

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Article history

Received date : 16-1-2026

Revised date : 17-1-2026

Accepted date : 27-1-2026

Published date : 15-2-2026

To cite this document:

Ismail, F., Chan, S. W., & Jared Tan, J. Y. (2026). Challenges and barriers faced by the young generation involved in trade unions. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 11 (80), 534 – 544.

Abstract: *In an increasingly volatile labour market, trade unions remain a key mechanism for safeguarding young workers' rights, welfare, and fair treatment at work. This paper synthesises key literature to explain why youth participation in trade unions remains limited and what can be done to strengthen engagement. The discussion identifies four recurring barriers: job instability and short-term employment that weakens union coverage; limited knowledge and exposure to labour rights and union functions; persistent gender inequality that constrains participation, especially among young women; and negative or misleading narratives circulated through social media that undermine unions' public image. Building on these insights, the paper highlights practical pathways to revitalise youth involvement, including modernising outreach via digital platforms, running targeted awareness campaigns through schools and higher education settings, and strengthening union credibility through trust-building and collaborative partnerships.*

Keywords: *youth; trade unions; participation barriers; job insecurity; union awareness; social media; labour rights*

Introduction

In this generation, the workplace is in high volatility which has caused teenagers to face challenges and barriers in their careers (Abdul Jalil et al., 2023). This has increased the need for trade unions to protect their rights and privileges to ensure that teenagers have stable jobs and income in this high-cost-of-living era. A trade union is an association that helps employee to address their needs and request fair treatment from the company (Yaacob et al., 2023). Each field has the relevant trade union, which was established to protect its employees to avoid unfair treatment or oppression by the employer. For example, the West Malaysia Malay Teachers Union (KGMMB) and the National Union of Teaching Profession are famous trade unions that were established to protect teachers' welfare and rights in Malaysia (Syed Husin, 2020).

According to Ahmado et al. (2024), trade unions exist to understand employees' needs within the company, as the company primarily focuses on profit while neglecting the contributions and welfare of employees. This will lead to the productivity of the company being reduced. The reason for this is that the employee will lack of motivation when the benefit that they should receive but the top management didn't provide them the good benefit. For example, when a worker is experienced and has worked for the company for many years, but the company did not increase his or her salary and did not promote the employee to a better position. As a result, trade union will represent the worker to negotiate the worker's salary with the employer. Based on Goh et al. (2023) study, if the process is successful, both parties, which are the employer and the union, will submit the collective bargaining agreement to the Industrial Court for approval to ensure the salary increase is legal. However, if the process fails, the union may request the government's approval to pressure the company by striking with the union members (Ragu, 2022). This has shown that trade unions play an important role in protecting the members' welfare. Hence, the young generation should participate in a trade union to protect themselves.

Although trade unions are popular and important for every worker as it will protect their rights, there are still many teenagers who remain inactive or don't have their own union to protect their welfare (Mahmood et al., 2021). This is due to the reason that the teenager isn't aware of trade unions and know about the importance of trade unions (Yusof et al., 2025; Soroko, 2023). According to Aziz et al. (2022), there is also an issue like the old employees in the union show negative perception of the union they participate in and affect the new members, especially teenagers who want to join. Therefore, this study aims to derive more deeply and in detail from the aspect of the challenges and barriers, advantages and disadvantages, impact, and strategies of the young generation involved in trade unions.

Challenges and Barriers faced by the young generation involved in the Trade Union

The first challenge faced by the young generation to involve in trade unions is the instability of their jobs. Nowadays, teenagers frequently change their jobs to get a higher salary, resulting in a short-term working period or temporary employment (Nicola et al., 2025). This factor has led to the issue that teenagers are excluded from union coverage, as they do not have a stable job to join the union. According to Yusof et al. (2025), the study mentioned that teenagers are usually involved in contract agreements or informal jobs in this era, such as Shopee sellers, content creators or Grab drivers who do not have their own union. This is due to the reason that teenagers want flexible working hours and a high salary, they choose to work for an online platform instead of a company or industry with low income (Shyamali Ranaraja, 2022). Thus, teenagers' involvement in unions has decreased in this generation.

Besides, the second challenge faced by the young generation to involve in trade union is lack of knowledge and exposure. This makes Generation Z unfamiliar with the role and function of trade unions because schools rarely provide education about labor rights or union participation. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025), the unemployment rate among youths aged 15-24 is 10.2%. This has indicated that many youths are not in formal employment. As a result, they have limited opportunities to learn about trade unions which reduces their awareness and participation in union activities. Moreover, this factor occurred due to teenagers don't want to further study for higher education which makes them have limited knowledge about unions (Ariffin, 2023). Hence, unions indicate that young people are rarely involved in the organization nowadays (Allen, 2022).

Moreover, the third challenge faced by the young generation to involve in trade union is gender inequality. Gender inequality existed in many workplaces that affected young people, especially young women engaged in union activities (Hoi et al., 2023; Grasso & Smith, 2022). According to Ismail et al. (2023), the research indicates women often face unfair treatment in companies such as low payment and fewer promotion opportunities compared to men as many workplaces still hold traditional views that limit women's roles and career growth. Hence, there are more and more unions around the world that are trying to promote the idea of youth participation in unions, especially among women (International Labour Organization, 2020). Apart from that, the fourth challenge is that the big company and the third party provide the wrong information to mislead the public (Triangle, 2025). The big company or other party will post a lot of negative messages on social media that will weaken the image of the union, such as saying that the union is an association that only joins by elderly (Pasquier et al., 2023). This will cause the young generation to have bad impressions on the trade unions as they will think that this association won't bring benefits to them, as they are outdated (Castiglioni, 2012). As a result, the young generation will resist joining a union.

Advantages and disadvantages of the young generation involved in the Trade Union

In today's workplace, young employees involved in trade unions are extremely important in this modern era. According to Allison (2021), the research indicated that young employees would have a stronger voice and bargaining power to protect their rights at the workplace if they are involved in unions. This is because teenagers' jobs these days are insecure as they are employed on contract and part-time which might cause them will lose their jobs easily. If they hold union membership, they will have better job security, such as fairer pay and improved working conditions. Apart from that, young women employees will get benefits when they are involved in trade unions, especially to protect them against sexual harassment and unfair treatment in the workplace. According to the International Trade Union Confederation (2024), unions have the responsibility to promote ILO Convention 190 which is also known as C190, to prevent violence and harassment in the workplace. The aim is to create a safe and respectful workplace for the employees, especially women, because they have limited power to protect themselves in a company. If women are involved in a union, the act protects them against discrimination and ensures they work in a safe working environment without imbalanced treatment (Ismail et al., 2023).

Furthermore, trade unions are a double-edged sword as they bring advantages but also disadvantages. This will make teenagers think twice before they join the trade unions. The first disadvantage is the high membership fees. High membership fees will bring a burden to young employees due to the fact that they have lower pay compared to older employees and cause a

portion of their income is needed to contribute to the union fees (Kourtis, 2024). The membership fees are also necessary for every member from the day they join the party to protect their welfare. Besides, strikes are also a disadvantage to some of the members. This is due to the reason that strikes are a common tool that the union will use to negotiate with the employer (Clegg, 2025). This will bring pressure to those employees who disagree with this option as they shouldn't or don't want to be involved in this action but they were forced to follow as these are the expectations from the union. This will cause the income of the employee to decrease to involve themselves in this strike. Sometimes trade unions will also bring conflict between workers and employers. This is due to the fact that unions disagree over the salary or workplace conditions might use strikes to affect the business operations and weaken the relationship between employees and employers. As a result, young employees should take into consideration before joining the trade unions (Muse, 2025).

Impact of the young generation involved in the Trade Union

The first impact that it brings to the young generation when they are involved in trade union is able to help the union to stay resilient as they are adapting to the latest technology and social media that enable them to communicate with those who wish to join the organization (Schoemann, 2018). According to Yusof et al. (2025), it is important to encourage teenagers to participate in unions. This is due to the reason that they are familiar with digital technology, and this will enable them to apply their skills in the union to help the organisation attract more members from society. For instance, they can use design software like Canva to design the banner or the poster to advertise on social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, and Instagram to attract youngsters to join the organization, as many of them in this era are using these platforms (Hodder et al., 2020). As a result, there will be more young employees who will be able to be exposed to knowledge about trade unions and have the interest to participate in the union.

Moreover, when there are more young teenagers involved in unions, there will be stronger power to voice out in society (Ten, 2025). This ensures that they are able to negotiate with the employer for a better salary or other job benefits, even as a young employee (Makgopa et al., 2025). As a result, the youth welfare will be under-protected when there are many members of young employees (International Labour Organization, 2024).

In this digital age, digital platforms have also become an important platform that enables exchange between goods and services like Food Panda (Abd Razak et al., 2024). This platform has provided job opportunities to young workers. However, the workers face challenges like long working hours and unstable income on the platform (War on What, 2025). For instance, the Food Panda rider might get a lower salary, as the platform will take a commission from the rider's income. If there are more freelance workers like Food Panda riders involved in unions, the organization will be able to help them negotiate for better prices and job benefits from the company. The involvement of more young people in unions is also able to ensure the union able to sustainability in future generations (Nitsche-Whitfield, 2023).

The fourth impact is having equal treatment in the workplace if the young generation involves themselves in a trade union (War on What, 2025). This is because a trade union will help its members to fight against inequality in the workplace (Ethical Trading Initiative, 2010). If teenagers join a trade union, that union will support them when they get discriminated in the workplace, like having unfair wages, long working hours, or unpaid holidays. For example, a union represents a young worker to negotiate with the employer about the young worker's

unfair wages and request better wages, treatment, and benefits for the young worker. Hence, the young worker's welfare in the workplace was protected by that union (Amnesty International, 2025).

The last impact is that young workers can have better career development. This is due to the reason that the trade union will provide training to its members who have joined (Robertson et al., 2025). Through providing training, the young workers are able to enhance their skills, like technical skills and transferable skills (Guerreschi et al., 2023). When the young workers have better skills compared with their peers, they will have better opportunities to get employed by a big corporation (International Labour Organization, 2024). Hence, young workers can get higher qualifications than they already held when they have more training (Trade Union Congress, 2016).

Strategies to attract the young generation involved in the Trade Union

After studying the trade union, it shows the importance of young people being involved in the trade union. A trade union can't use traditional methods to attract new members in this era instead of unions should use the latest technology to modernize their strategies to attract the teenager to participate in trade unions. Nowadays, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, and WhatsApp are usually used by young people (Hodder et al., 2020). Thus, unions can use social media to promote their organization about the benefits and welfare that the new members are able to get if they join. According to European Trade Union Confederation (2021), unions should use communication tools that young people usually use to get their attention. For instance, unions can record videos to introduce the trade union and share the members' benefits. The recorded video can be shared on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to expose the knowledge to the youngsters. This method enables youngsters to learn the knowledge of unions and increase their passion to involved in the union (Balshaw, 2024).

Besides, the unions should organize campaigns in the community, like high school or higher education (Ismail et al., 2023; Visser, 2024). This is due to the reason that there are many teenagers that able to study until high school which make the students exposed to limited knowledge of unions when they are still young (Yusof et al., 2025). This will make them understand the role of unions and involve themselves in a union when they work in a company in the future to protect themselves and get treated by the company fairly (Amnesty International, 2025).

The third strategy that unions can implement is to encourage universities to create cocurricular activities, like a student union, that enable students to have a real experience in the union (Dubber, 2024). This is because students who are involved in these activities will have exposure to the union activities and understand how they can protect themselves even when they are still students (Brabo et al., 2017). As a student union, they can have the right to voice out to request student welfare from the university when they have bargaining power because of the many students involved in the organization. The university will pay attention to students when the bargaining power is strong. The student union will be able to negotiate with the university's top management to request better facilities or services (Ellen Dixon, 2024). For instance, the bus schedule of University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia to City Campus is only available for students who stay in the hostel on campus. However, the students who live outside the university hostel have to take a bus to the main campus first and then transfer to another bus to reach the City Campus, which is unfair to those who live outside the campus. Hence, the

student union took action by requesting the top management of the university to provide sufficient buses outside the campus hostel so that students are able to travel directly to the City Campus. This enables students to learn to manage a union, which is useful for them when they join trade unions in their future workplaces.

The fourth strategy to attract teenagers involved in trade unions is to build loyalty and trust with existing members (Union.dev, 2024). Trade unions should concern every member's needs in the organization to ensure that members' demands are achieved. This is because existing members will share the information with their friends or relatives to promote the union which they are involved. Thus, a union must perform well to build strong loyalty towards its members by helping them to negotiate with the company for better welfare, so that the members will have trust in it and promote it to others (National Human Resource Centre, 2021). When the members started to trust their union, it was able to form unity among each other and strengthen the union's reputation, which was able to attract the interest and participation of younger generations in the union (International Journal of Labour Research, 2024).

The last strategy to attract teenagers involved in trade unions is collaboration between the union and other organizations (Union.dev, 2024). A union can collaborate with other organizations, such as the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC), a non-profit organization (Alexander, 2024; MTUC, 2013). This collaboration enables a private union to get assistance from MTUC, as it can provide a better network and resources for a private union. For instance, MTUC has collaborated with the Chemical Workers Union of Malaya (CWUM) to conduct a workshop to exchange knowledge about environmental sustainability (MGTC, 2023). This collaboration has exposed CWUM to the public, which enables the public to know the existence of CWUM. Hence, this collaboration increases the chance for CWUM to attract new members. The new members might include younger workers, as they treat this union as active and modern when they conduct this kind of modern workshop.

Conclusion

The study of teenagers' involvement in trade unions shows that youth participation is crucial to ensure the unions are able to sustain in the future to protect the workers' rights, promote fair treatment, and enhance workplace conditions. However, due to the workplace evolving rapidly, and artificial intelligence technology continuing to evolve, it has caused unions to face challenges in connecting with the young generation. This issue has also made the teenagers unable to gain knowledge of unions, and they lack of awareness towards unions. Hence, teenagers aren't aware of their labour rights or benefits as if they were members of a union. This often makes them stay outside of union membership and miss the opportunity to protect themselves in their workplaces.

After studying previous research, it can be seen that there are several challenges that have led to low participation of youth in trade unions. The main reason is the lack of awareness and knowledge of the unions role as many young people are not exposed to relevant knowledge during their studies. Hence, this issue is often due to their education and work experience. Additionally, challenges such as job instability and gender inequality shape their views about unions. Younger generations didn't treat unions as suitable for modern jobs, especially when they work as part-time. Furthermore, unions face difficulties in implementing the latest technology to recruit young employees to join the union and criticize by the big company and third party.

Based on the above challenges, the strategy that can be adopted by the union to appeal to the younger generation to overcome the above challenges and barriers is to implement digital platforms and social media to share information and promote awareness about workers' rights. This is because this action allows unions to deliver information to youth as youth spend most of their time on their social media. Unions should also run campaigns in places like universities or high schools to promote the importance and roles of the union to students. Apart from that, unions can collaborate with universities to create co-curricular programs to provide students with an opportunity to gain experience in union activities. These programs are not only meant to improve their awareness but also help students understand how unions protect and represent employees in workplaces. The union also needs to build loyalty with its members and collaborate with other organizations to ensure they are able to expose to the public and raise their awareness on the union.

To sum up, the participation of the young generation in trade unions is important to ensure continued progress and stability of the union. The participation of teenagers will also help to connect the traditional structure of union with the needs of the modern workplace. Hence, young people aware, and actively involved in unions will make the unions become stronger, more inclusive and better prepared to face future challenges. Therefore, it is important for the union to raise awareness and collaborate with educational institutions and trade unions so that the next generation is able to involve in union to protect their rights, welfare and benefits in their workplaces.

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