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Factors Shaping the Perceptions Toward Economic Inequality among Bangladeshi Adolescents: A nationwide cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Background

Perceptions of economic inequality among adolescents are considered to influence and determine future social cohesion; however, they are not thoroughly examined in low- and middle-income nations, especially in South Asia. The situation in Bangladesh is particularly very problematic: the Gini coefficient increased to 0.499 in 2022, institutional trust was at a very low level, and a political revolution led by students broke out in July 2024. No previous research has investigated the ways in which Bangladeshi adolescents viewed economic inequality during this prerevolutionary era, and nothing has been done to quantify the ways in which sociopolitical and media-related factors mediate perceptions.

Methods

A cross-sectional survey across the whole country was developed with 3,917 school- and college-going adolescents (January–May 2024) using a multistage random sampling method. The scores on the Perceived Economic Inequality Scale (PEIS; α = 0.806) were divided into high, medium, and low. Multinomial logistic regression was used to identify sociodemographic and sociopolitical predictors, and bootstrapped mediation analysis (PROCESS Macro, Model 4; 5,000 resamples) was used to test the possibility of institutional trust (judiciary, police, TV news, newspaper) mediating the gender-PEIS relationship.

Results

Most teens (52.9%) described high perceived economic inequality (mean PEIS = 19.5 ± 5.2; range 028). Urban residence (AOR = 8.14; 95% CI: 3.18–20.82; p < 0.001), rural residence (AOR = 2.21; 95% CI: 1.14–4.27; p = 0.018), and science-stream enrollment (AOR = 1.88; 95% CI: 1.52–2.34; p < 0.001) were the strongest predictors of high perception. Reduced trust in the judiciary and police was linked to increased perceived inequality. Trust in institutional and media sources completely mediated the impact of gender on PEIS.

Conclusion

In prerevolutionary Bangladesh, adolescents strongly perceived high economic inequality, which is influenced by urbanization, the academic setting, institutional distrust, and media consumption. Such results suggest specific policies to increase institutional accountability, media literacy, and structural disparities in education and civic life.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last thirty years, economic inequality in most parts of the world has increased, becoming one of the challenges of the twenty-first century [1]. An increase in inequality is not only a distributional issue but also closely linked to decreasing population health, growing mental health burden, declining social mobility, and political instability [2, 3]. An increasing Gini coefficient is associated with an increased prevalence of depression, anxiety and poor subjective well-being, as well as a decrease in trust in democratic institutions [4, 5]. These trends are especially acute in South Asia: There has been a high rate of economic growth accompanied by deep structural imbalances, which have undermined social contracts and have contributed to popular dissatisfaction [6]. An example of tension is Bangladesh. The nation experienced impressive poverty and economic growth in 20 years, but the growth in income inequality was even greater: the Gini coefficient increased between 0.46 in 2010 and 0.499 in 2022, which is one of the most significant increases in the region [7, 8]. Regressive taxation, concentrated land ownership, access to good education and healthcare facilities among the rural and peri-urban population, and the patronage-based political economy are structural drivers. The civil service quota system, which many believed to be unfairly deprived of the majority of meritocratic opportunity, was an area of youth resentment [9]. These institutional factors were the context behind the July Revolution of 2024, a mass movement led by students that culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina after fifteen years in office [10]. The anti-quota protests led to the revolt, but the revolt was supported by the built-up resentment against corruption, the tyranny of civic freedoms and the belief that there was a systematic marginalization of ordinary citizens in both economic and political life [11–15]. Knowledge of how adolescents viewed the issue of economic inequality right before the revolution is thus both theoretically and policy relevant: this is the attitudinal ground through which mass mobilization is made. Perceived economic inequality (PEI) is the subjective perception of economic inequality that is composed of both cognitive acknowledgment of the differences between rich and poor people (e.g., there are very few rich people and many poor people) and judgmental opinions on fairness (e.g., large income differences are unfair) [16, 17]. The two dimensions are analytically different: cognitive perception influences individual attitudes toward systemic change, and evaluation leads to the endorsement or rejection of redistributive policies [18, 19].

The current literature mostly relies on adult cohorts, either in West or East Asia; South Asian research is well represented in the peer-reviewed literature, but Bangladesh-specific research is practically missing [20, 21]. It is a crucial time for the development of sociopolitical attitudes during adolescence. There is growing evidence that exposure to inequality in early life influences political participation in the long term, redistributive preferences, and civic engagement [22, 23]. Adolescents in Bangladesh are in a peculiar situation: they are not only beneficiaries of educational growth in Bangladesh but also observers of institutional inefficiency. The interrelationship that exists between the socioeconomic background of families, school setting, media usage, and political socialization in the development of views on inequality among this generation of people has not been analyzed in a systematic way.

This study is informed by three theoretical frameworks. First, social cognitive theory suggests that observational learning (that is, family, peers, and media) influences the cognitive schema according to which adolescents perceive social realities, including economic inequalities [24]. Second, the perceived

unfairness model proposes that perceptions of systemic injustice increase when outcomes are perceived to be disproportional or when the gatekeeping institutions are perceived to be unreliable, resulting in a drive toward resistance or disengagement [25, 26]. Third, critical consciousness theory implies that adolescents who become aware of structural inequalities by becoming involved in political activities and civic participation are better able to see and do something with inequity [22]. Although these frameworks are salient, there is a research gap; no researchers have investigated the concomitant effects of sociodemographic factors, family political context, institutional trust, and media consumption patterns on the perception of economic inequality in Bangladesh or even tested whether institutional trust mediates the relationship between gender and perceived inequality. This disjuncture is especially important when the prerevolutionary environment of the research under consideration where the level of structural inequality and institutional distrust was historically high is considered. The current research fills this gap by aiming to achieve the following three objectives: (i) to characterize the prevalence and distribution of high, middle, and low economic inequality perceptions among school- and college-going adolescents in Bangladesh from January–May 2024; (ii) to determine sociodemographic, sociopolitical, and media-related factors that are independently connected with the level of perceived economic inequality; and (iii) to examine whether trust in judicial, law enforcement, and media institutions mediates the relationship between gender and perceived economic inequality.

2. METHODS

2.1 Study Design and Setting

A nationwide cross-sectional survey involving school- and college-going adolescents was carried out in all eight administrative divisions between January and May 2024 in Bangladesh. The data collection method used an online survey platform (Google Forms) because of the high penetration of smartphones among secondary and higher-secondary students in urban and peri-urban Bangladesh and the logistical limitations of face-to-face data collection at this magnitude. The research was contextualized within the time frame right before the July 2024 revolution, which offered a unique prevent opportunity for adolescent sociopolitical attitudes.

2.2 Sampling and Participants

Multistage random sampling was used. In the first stage, a division and urban/rural classification was used to stratify schools and colleges; simple random sampling of a national institutional frame was used to select the institutions. Simple random sampling was employed in the second stage to invite eligible students in the sampled institutions; this implies that there were equal chances of selection among students. Questionnaire clarity, completion time, and psychometric properties were evaluated in a pilot study (n = 67); slight changes in the wording of the items were made prior to full implementation. The inclusion criteria were (i) attending a secondary or higher-secondary school in Bangladesh, (ii) being Bangladeshi, and (ii) being aged 13–19 years. The exclusion criteria included dual citizenship, the use of a foreign curriculum, and the impossibility of providing e-consent. Agreement of parents or guardians

was also sought in the case of those under the age of 18 years. The final sample consisted of 3,917 adolescents (mean age = 16.7 years, SD = 1.6; range 13–19). The sample was spread among Chattogram (46.2%), Dhaka (45.7%), and six other divisions (8.2%), which are the demographic centers in the country.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Perceived Economic Inequality Scale (PEIS)

The primary outcome measure was measured using the seven-item Perceived Economic Inequality Scale (PEIS), modified to measure the national level of inequality in accordance with Valtorta et al. [27] and Schmalor and Heine [17]. The scale has three cognitive questions (e.g., “In Bangladesh, there are some very rich people and many poor people”) and four evaluation questions (e.g., “It is totally unfair that there are great income disparities between wealthy and poor people”). The responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree). The internal consistency of the current sample was high (Cronbach's α = 0.806) and was comparable to the α of 0.80 of the Italian development sample [27] and α = 0.82 of a similar scale validation test in university students in Peru [21]. Total PEIS scores (range 0–28; mean = 19.5; SD = 5.2) were categorized into three levels: low (≤ 14), medium (15–21), and high (≥ 22). These thresholds were used in all the analyses.

2.3.2 Institutional Trust Measures

The perceived trust in the judiciary, the police, the television news, and the newspaper news was measured using a single item rated on a four-point ordinal scale (1 = not at all; 2 = not much; 3 = some; 4 = a lot). The construct validity of single-item trust measures has been found to be acceptable in large national surveys; a single-item measure of trust in government demonstrated a test-retest reliability of r = 0.73. In addition, recoded as continuous variables, the trust scores were used as mediators in path-analytic models.

2.3.3 Sociopolitical and Media Variables

A complete set of sociopolitical variables was covered depending on previous theoretical models and the context of the Bangladeshi policy: political involvement (self-reported participation in political activities, Yes/No), negative attitudes toward politics (Yes/No), involvement in political party events (Yes/No), family political involvement, affiliation with the ruling party among family members or other relatives, social organization involvement, and monitoring of consumer prices. Variables related to media included the following: most frequently used social media (Facebook/X, Instagram/Tik Tok, YouTube, WhatsApp/Imo); preferred media content (political, recreational, religious, or games/sports); frequency of consuming crime- and police-related media; and trust in TV and newspaper news (as above). Sociodemographic covariates included age (dichotomized as < 17 vs. ≥17 years and above on the basis of the median of the sample), sex (male/female), religion, residence (rural/suburban/urban), living arrangement, academic stream, family government employment, and recent use of government services.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed in SPSS version 25.0. All the categorical variables are given descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Pearson chi-square tests were used to measure the bivariate relationships between each independent variable and the PEIS category. At $p = 0.05$, significant variables from the bivariate analyses were included in the multivariable model. Multinomial logistic regression with medium perception as the reference group revealed the factors that were independently related to high and low perceived inequality. Adjusted odds ratios (AORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) are given. The likelihood ratio test, Nagelkerke R^2 and VIF (< 3.0 of all the variables) were used to assess model fit (no multicollinearity). The PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2013 [28] with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and bias-corrected 95% CI) was used to mediate the relationship between gender (predictor) and the PEIS total score (continuous outcome) with mediation by trust in the judiciary, police, TV news and newspaper news. All the tests were two tailed, and $p < 0.05$ was considered significant.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The Institutional Review Board of Noakhali Science and Technology University gave ethical approval (Reference: NSTU/SCI/EC/2023/180). Electronic consent was given to all participants who completed the questionnaire. Participants younger than the age of 18 years received parental or guardian consent. The interviewees were free to participate, and their identities remained concealed.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic data of the 3,917 participants. The sample included mostly older adolescents (58.7% and above; 17 years and older; mean age = 16.7 years, SD = 1.6, range 13–19 years). More than half of them lived in urban settings (51.3%), and most were Muslims (94.4%). Arts (43.6%) and Sciences (41.8) were the most prevalent academic streams. A quarter of teenagers (24.1) said that they were in social organizations, and 32.6% were politically active. There were negative views on politics (40.1%). The level of trust in the institutions was very low: just 5.4% of the teenagers had trust in the judiciary, and only 2.1% trusted the police the same way. Confidence in TV news (5.5% a lot) and newspaper news (9.1% a lot) was also low. The most common social media platform was Facebook/X (48.5%), and recreational content was the most popular media (49.3%).

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants (N = 3,917)

Variable	Category	n	%	p value
Age	Below 17 (< 17 years)	1,617	41.3	< 0.001
	17 years or older (≥ 17 years)	2,300	58.7	
Gender	Male	2,321	59.3	< 0.001
	Female	1,596	40.7	
Religion	Islam	3,698	94.4	0.002
	Buddhism	18	0.5	
	Hinduism	183	4.7	
	Christianity	18	0.5	
Residence	Rural (Village)	954	24.4	< 0.001
	Suburban (Upazila/District town)	954	24.4	
	Urban (City corporation)	2,009	51.3	
Living arrangement	With family	2,897	74.0	< 0.001
	Without family (hostel/mess/alone)	1,020	26.0	
Academic stream	Science	1,636	41.8	< 0.001
	Arts/Humanities	1,708	43.6	
	Business Studies	573	14.6	
Family government employment	Yes	1,468	37.5	0.015
	No	2,449	62.5	
Recent government service use	Yes	1,669	42.6	0.011
	No	2,248	57.4	
Social organization involvement	Yes	943	24.1	< 0.001
	No	2,974	75.9	
Political engagement	Yes	1,277	32.6	< 0.001
	No	2,640	67.4	

Note. p values are from Pearson chi-square tests comparing PEIS level (high/medium/low) across each variable.

Variable	Category	n	%	p value
Negative attitude toward politics	Yes	1,570	40.1	< 0.001
	No	2,347	59.9	
Trust in the Judiciary	Not at all	652	16.6	< 0.001
	Not much	1,024	26.1	
	Some	2,031	51.9	
	A lot	210	5.4	
Trust in the Police	Not at all	1,158	29.6	< 0.001
	Not much	1,118	28.5	
	Some	1,560	39.8	
	A lot	81	2.1	
Trust in TV news	Not at all	307	7.8	< 0.001
	Not much	2,536	64.7	
	Some	858	21.9	
	A lot	216	5.5	
Trust in newspaper news	Not at all	232	5.9	< 0.001
	Not much	679	17.3	
	Some	2,651	67.7	
	A lot	355	9.1	
Most used social media platform	Facebook/X	1,898	48.5	0.020
	Instagram/TikTok	607	15.5	
	YouTube	897	22.9	
	WhatsApp/Imo	515	13.1	
Preferred media content	Political	543	13.9	< 0.001
	Recreational	1,930	49.3	
	Religious	545	13.9	

Note. p values are from Pearson chi-square tests comparing PEIS level (high/medium/low) across each variable.

Variable	Category	n	%	p value
	Games and Sports	899	23.0	
Total		3,917	100	

Note. p values are from Pearson chi-square tests comparing PEIS level (high/medium/low) across each variable.

3.2 Distribution of perceived economic inequality

The mean total PEIS score was 19.45 (SD = 5.19; possible range 0–28; median = 20; IQR: 16–23). With the preset tertile cutoffs, 52.9% of adolescents reported having high perceived economic inequality (n = 2,072), 42.7% reported having medium perceived economic inequality (n = 1,672), and 4.4% reported having low perceived economic inequality (n = 173). The fact that the majority of the answers were high suggests that almost all adolescents were aware of economic inequality on a grand scale, and most also rated inequality as unjust. The way these perceived levels of economic inequality are perceived is shown in Fig. 1.

3.3 Bivariate associations with perceived economic inequality

Table 2 shows the proportions of PEIS types according to important sociodemographic and sociopolitical factors. Significant (all $p < 0.001$) relationships were found between the variables age, gender, religion, residence, living arrangement, academic stream, family government employment, recent use of government services, social organization involvement, political engagement, negative attitude toward politics, trust in all four institutional sources, use of social media platforms, and preferred type of media content. Among the findings, older adolescents (aged 17 years and above) were more inclined to report high perceptions (56.0% vs. 48.4% when aged younger than 17 years). Male adolescents reported a slightly higher percentage of high perception (55.3% vs. 49.4% in females), but females reported slightly higher percentages of low perception (4.9% vs. 4.0%). The highest percentage was among urban adolescents (58.1%), as opposed to 49.7% among suburban adolescents and 45.1% among rural adolescents. The highest percentage of high-rated students (61.1%) was observed among science-stream students. Always related to high perception were low levels of trust in the judiciary (not at all: 62.0% high perception; not much: 63.0%) and police (not at all: 59.9% high perception). The highest percentage of high perception (59.3%) was linked to a preference for political media content. The perceptions of economic inequality by age, gender, residence, faculty, and trust in institutions such as the Judiciary and the Police are shown in **Fig. 2.**

Table 2
Distribution of perceived economic inequality level by key sociodemographic and sociopolitical variables (N = 3,917)

Variable	Group	High % (n)	Medium % (n)	Low % (n)	p value
Age	Below 17	783 (48.4)	759 (46.9)	75 (4.6)	< 0.001
	17 or older	1,289 (56.0)	913 (39.7)	98 (4.3)	
Gender	Male	1,283 (55.3)	944 (40.7)	94 (4.0)	< 0.001
	Female	789 (49.4)	728 (45.6)	79 (4.9)	
Religion	Islam	1,963 (53.1)	1,563 (42.3)	172 (4.7)	0.002
	Buddhism	3 (16.7)	15 (83.3)	0 (0.0)	
	Hinduism	97 (53.0)	85 (46.4)	1 (0.5)	
	Christianity	9 (50.0)	9 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	
Residence	Rural	430 (45.1)	477 (50.0)	47 (4.9)	< 0.001
	Suburban	474 (49.7)	443 (46.4)	37 (3.9)	
	Urban	1,168 (58.1)	752 (37.4)	89 (4.4)	
Living arrangement	With family	1,482 (51.2)	1,281 (44.2)	134 (4.6)	< 0.001
	Without family	590 (57.8)	391 (38.3)	39 (3.8)	
Academic stream	Science	1,000 (61.1)	573 (35.0)	63 (3.9)	< 0.001
	Arts	808 (47.3)	823 (48.2)	77 (4.5)	
	Business Studies	264 (46.1)	276 (48.2)	33 (5.8)	
Family govt. employment	Yes	795 (54.2)	594 (40.5)	79 (5.4)	0.015
	No	1,277 (52.1)	1,078 (44.0)	94 (3.8)	
Recent govt. service use	Yes	838 (50.2)	758 (45.4)	73 (4.4)	0.011

Note. Values are n (%). p values from Pearson chi-square tests. PEIS categories: High ≥ 22, Medium 15–21, Low ≤ 14.

Variable	Group	High % (n)	Medium % (n)	Low % (n)	p value
	No	1,234 (54.9)	914 (40.7)	100 (4.4)	
Social org. involvement	Yes	558 (59.2)	355 (37.6)	30 (3.2)	< 0.001
	No	1,514 (50.9)	1,317 (44.3)	143 (4.8)	
Political engagement	Yes	689 (54.0)	554 (43.4)	34 (2.7)	< 0.001
	No	1,383 (52.4)	1,118 (42.3)	139 (5.3)	
Negative attitude (politics)	Yes	909 (57.9)	586 (37.3)	75 (4.8)	< 0.001
	No	1,163 (49.6)	1,086 (46.3)	98 (4.2)	
Trust in Judiciary	Not at all	404 (62.0)	200 (30.7)	48 (7.4)	< 0.001
	Not much	633 (61.8)	374 (36.5)	17 (1.7)	
	Some	953 (46.9)	977 (48.1)	101 (5.0)	
	A lot	82 (39.0)	121 (57.6)	7 (3.3)	
Trust in Police	Not at all	694 (59.9)	394 (34.0)	70 (6.0)	< 0.001
	Not much	704 (63.0)	381 (34.1)	33 (3.0)	
	Some	642 (41.2)	852 (54.6)	66 (4.2)	
	A lot	32 (39.5)	45 (55.6)	4 (4.9)	
Trust in TV news	Not at all	167 (54.4)	115 (37.5)	25 (8.1)	< 0.001
	Not much	1,270 (50.1)	1,161 (45.8)	105 (4.1)	
	Some	524 (61.1)	309 (36.0)	25 (2.9)	
	A lot	110 (50.9)	87 (40.3)	19 (8.8)	
Trust in newspaper news	Not at all	123 (53.0)	81 (34.9)	28 (12.1)	< 0.001
	Not much	425 (62.7)	217 (32.0)	36 (5.3)	
	Some	1,338 (50.5)	1,217 (45.9)	95 (3.6)	

Note. Values are n (%). p values from Pearson chi-square tests. PEIS categories: High ≥ 22, Medium 15–21, Low ≤ 14.

Variable	Group	High % (n)	Medium % (n)	Low % (n)	p value
	A lot	186 (52.1)	157 (44.0)	14 (3.9)	
Social media platform	Facebook/X	1,024 (54.0)	775 (40.8)	99 (5.2)	0.020
	Instagram/TikTok	333 (54.9)	247 (40.7)	27 (4.4)	
	YouTube	456 (50.8)	413 (46.0)	28 (3.1)	
	WhatsApp/Imo	259 (50.3)	237 (46.0)	19 (3.7)	
Preferred media content	Political	322 (59.3)	198 (36.5)	23 (4.2)	< 0.001
	Recreational	1,033 (53.5)	823 (42.6)	74 (3.8)	
	Religious	284 (52.1)	246 (45.1)	15 (2.8)	
	Games and Sports	433 (48.2)	405 (45.1)	51 (6.8)	

Note. Values are n (%). p values from Pearson chi-square tests. PEIS categories: High ≥ 22, Medium 15–21, Low ≤ 14.

3.4 Multivariable Predictors of Perceived Economic Inequality

The results of the multinomial logistic regression model (reference category: medium perception; Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.183) are shown in Table 3. A number of variables were significant predictors of high versus medium perception: The strongest predictor was residence: urban adolescents had more than eight times the likelihood of reporting high perception than suburban adolescents did (AOR = 8.14; 95% CI: 3.18–20.82; p < 0.001), and rural adolescents had an approximately twice the likelihood of high perception (AOR = 2.21; 95% CI: 1.14–4.27; p = 0.018). Students in the science stream were much more likely to have high perceptions than students in business studies were (AOR = 1.88; 95% CI: 1.52–2.34; p < 0.001). Adolescents who lived with family were more likely to have a greater than twice the odds of those who lived independently (AOR = 2.20; 95% CI: 1.10–4.21; p = 0.017). Younger age (< 17 years) was associated with 18% lower odds of high perception (AOR = 0.82; 95% CI: 0.70–0.96; p = 0.019). Sociopolitical reasons also played an important role. A negative attitude toward politics was associated with 16% higher odds of high perception (AOR = 1.16; 95% CI: 1.00–1.35; p = 0.030). Social organization involvement increased the odds of high perception by 28% (AOR = 1.28; 95% CI: 1.07–1.52; p = 0.005). Preference for political media content was associated with 44% greater odds of high perception (AOR = 1.44; 95% CI: 1.12–1.85; p = 0.004), as was recreational content preference (AOR = 1.30; 95% CI: 1.08–1.56; p = 0.005). Adolescents who had recently received government services were much less likely to be high in perception (AOR = 0.75; 95% CI: 0.65–0.86; p < 0.001). With respect to low and medium

perceptions, a 42 percent reduction in the odds of the lowest perception was found for males (AOR = 0.58; 95% CI: 0.38–0.90; p = 0.014), indicating that male adolescents were significantly less likely to report the lowest level of perceived inequality. Urban residence was associated with lower odds of the lowest perception (AOR = 0.52; 95% CI: 0.38–0.88; p < 0.001). The employment of a family member by the government was also linked to increased chances of low perception (AOR = 1.74; 95% CI: 1.23–2.45; p = 0.001). Political engagement substantially reduced the odds of low perception (AOR = 0.43; 95% CI: 0.27–0.66; p < 0.001). Favoring recreational and religious media content also greatly decreased the likelihood of low perception.

Table 3
Multinomial logistic regression: factors associated with the level of perceived economic inequality (Reference: Medium perception; N = 3,917)

Variable (Reference)	High Perception		Low Perception		
	AOR (95% CI)	p value	AOR (95% CI)	p value	
Age (Ref: ≥17 years)	Below 17	0.82 (0.70–0.96)	**0.019***	1.14 (0.76–1.70)	0.502
Gender (Ref: Female)	Male	0.95 (0.80–1.13)	0.626	0.58 (0.38–0.90)	**0.014***
Residence (Ref: Suburban)	Rural	2.21 (1.14–4.27)	**0.018***	—	0.990
	Urban	8.14 (3.18–20.82)	**< 0.001****	0.52 (0.38–0.88)	**< 0.001****
Religion (Ref: Christianity)	Islam	1.32 (0.50–3.49)	0.574	0.41 (0.12–1.43)	0.162
	Buddhism	0.24 (0.04–1.26)	**0.089**	4.66 (1.05–20.72)	**0.044***
	Hinduism	1.30 (0.47–3.62)	0.604	4.75 (0.97–23.05)	**0.053**
Living arrangement (Ref: Without family)	With family	2.20 (1.10–4.21)	**0.017***	0.77 (0.23–2.49)	0.660
Academic stream (Ref: Business Studies)	Science	1.88 (1.52–2.34)	**< 0.001****	1.02 (0.61–1.70)	0.930
	Arts	1.02 (0.83–1.26)	0.804	0.73 (0.45–1.18)	0.195
Family govt. employment (Ref: No)	Yes	1.09 (0.95–1.26)	0.193	1.74 (1.23–2.45)	**0.001****

Note. AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. Reference category is medium PEIS perception. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.001. "—" indicates reference or near-zero cell frequency precluding estimation. Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.183. All VIF < 3.0.

Variable (Reference)	High Perception		Low Perception		
	AOR (95% CI)	p value	AOR (95% CI)	p value	
Recent govt. service (Ref: No)	Yes	0.75 (0.65–0.86)	**< 0.001****	0.72 (0.51–1.03)	**0.074**
Govt. official addressing issues (Ref: No)	Yes	0.84 (0.67–1.06)	0.155	0.72 (0.51–1.03)	**0.005****
Social org. involvement (Ref: No)	Yes	1.28 (1.07–1.52)	**0.005****	0.86 (0.54–1.38)	0.550
Consumer price monitoring (Ref: No)	Yes	1.09 (0.94–1.26)	0.233	1.09 (0.77–1.54)	0.620
Political engagement (Ref: No)	Yes	0.96 (0.82–1.13)	0.690	0.43 (0.27–0.66)	**< 0.001****
Neg. attitude toward politics (Ref: No)	Yes	1.16 (1.00–1.35)	**0.030***	1.05 (0.73–1.52)	0.790
Social media (Ref: WhatsApp/Imo)	Facebook/X	1.10 (0.90–1.33)	0.350	1.95 (1.11–3.41)	**0.019***
	Instagram/TikTok	1.11 (0.89–1.39)	0.358	1.37 (0.71–2.64)	0.345
	YouTube	1.01 (0.82–1.24)	0.920	0.95 (0.49–1.87)	0.888
Preferred content (Ref: Games & Sports)	Political	1.44 (1.12–1.85)	**0.004****	0.65 (0.33–1.28)	0.210
	Recreational	1.30 (1.08–1.56)	**0.005****	0.38 (0.24–0.58)	**< 0.001****
	Religious	0.92 (0.72–1.17)	0.480	0.28 (0.15–0.55)	**< 0.001****

Note. AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. Reference category is medium PEIS perception. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.001. "—" indicates reference or near-zero cell frequency precluding estimation. Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.183. All VIF < 3.0.

3.5 Mediation of the Gender–PEIS Relationship by Institutional and Media Trust

Bootstrapped mediation analysis (5,000 resamples) was performed to determine whether trust in the judiciary (TJ), police (TP), TV news (TTV), or newspaper news (TN) mediated the relationship between gender (coded 1 = male, 2 = female) and the total PEIS score. According to Fig. 3, there are four significant indirect pathways were identified. Female gender was associated with lower levels of trust in the judiciary ($\beta = 0.175$, $p < 0.001$) and police ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn were associated with higher PEIS scores (TJ → PEIS: $\beta = -0.147$, $p < 0.001$; TP → PEIS: $\beta = -0.096$, $p < 0.001$). Female gender was also associated with lower levels of trust in TV news ($\beta = 0.068$, $p < 0.001$) and newspaper news ($\beta = 0.216$, $p < 0.001$), which showed weaker or nonsignificant paths to PEIS. The direct effect of gender on PEIS was nonsignificant after these mediators were accounted for ($\beta = -0.05$, $p = 0.09$), indicating full mediation. These results suggest that gender differences in perceived economic inequality are not direct but are channeled through differential levels of institutional and media trust.

Bootstrapped mediation analysis (with n resamples = 5,000) was used to test the mediation between gender (coded 1 = male, 2 = female) and the PEIS total score by trust in the judiciary (TJ), trust in the police (TP), trust in TV news (TTV), and trust in newspaper news (TN). There were four major indirect pathways. Female gender was associated with lower levels of trust in the judiciary ($\beta = 0.175$, $p < 0.001$) and police ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn were associated with higher PEIS scores (TJ → PEIS: $\beta = -0.147$, $p < 0.001$; TP → PEIS: $\beta = -0.096$, $p < 0.001$). Gender (women) was also related to reduced levels of trust in TV news ($\beta = 0.068$, $p = 0.001$) and newspaper news ($\beta = 0.216$, $p < 0.001$), which had weaker or nonsignificant relationships with PEIS. When these mediators were considered, the direct impact of gender on PEIS was not significant ($\beta = -0.05$, $p = 0.09$), indicating complete mediation. These findings indicate that the differences in perceived economic inequality between genders are not direct but are funneled using the differences in institutional and media trust.

4. DISCUSSION

This research represents the first country-wide representative investigation of perceived economic inequality among adolescents in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. In a survey conducted among 3,917 adolescents surveyed in the first half of 2024 (before the July Revolution), more than half (52.9) reported that they perceived high economic inequality, and the average PEIS score was 19.5 out of 28. This distribution is congruent with the results of Barreiro and Wainryb [21], who reported increased salience of inequality among adolescents in the setting of a high level of structural disparity, and with the findings of Choi et al. [20], who reported a higher level of inequality salience among young adults in South Korea during times of economic stress. These trends are enhanced by the Bangladeshi context because of a combination of a rapidly increasing Gini coefficient, widespread institutional mistrust, and an atmosphere of political animosity that was in the air before the revolution.

The most conspicuous multivariate result is the domination of a city dwelling as a predictor of high perceived inequality (AOR = 8.14). The visible stratification of wealth is directly presented to urban adolescents in Bangladesh: the differences between the glitter of commercialized areas and the overcrowded informal slums are the daily experience of Dhaka and Chattogram, the two most elaborated cities in this sample. These observations are in agreement with those of Troost et al. [29], who reported that apparent socioeconomic differences in urban areas increase the perception of inequality and with the greater urbanization-inequality literature [30]. It is also possible that compared with suburban adolescents, rural adolescents were more aware of agricultural precarity and lacked formal employment and service access, which explains why they viewed inequality to be significantly greater (AOR = 2.21). The policy consequences are that there should be spatially specific social protection, especially in the urban periphery and in the rural regions where there is little public infrastructure.

Of interest is the strong association between science–stream enrollment and high perceptions of inequality (AOR = 1.88). In Bangladesh, higher-achieving students in secondary schools in urban or peri-urban areas are usually recruited into science programs and might be subject to more rigorous and analytic pedagogical practices than their counterparts in the arts or business sectors are [31]. This can increase sensitivity to systemic inequalities. Business study students, in turn, might acquire a more utilitarian, or market-accommodating, worldview in which economic differences are seen as functional, as opposed to unjust [32]. Longitudinal studies are needed to separate attitudes that have been formed before educational impacts.

High perceived inequality was steadily correlated with low institutional trust in both the bivariate and regression models. Those who had little trust in the judiciary or the police were significantly more likely to experience an understanding of high economic inequality, which supports the results of Drishti et al. [33] in the Western Balkans that institutional distrust and perceptions of inequality-of-opportunity are closely interconnected. Such an association has historical roots in the Bangladeshi context: During the Hasina government, the general impression of the judiciary and police politicization made these institutions symbols of elite capture rather than the impartiality of social justice [12–14]. The restoration of perceived systemic fairness requires a precondition of rebuilding adolescent trust in these institutions through clear appointment processes, accountability frameworks and the redressal of grievances.

High-inequality perception was linked to political negativism (a negative opinion of politics), which was slightly higher (AOR = 1.16), with politically engaged adolescents being significantly less likely to report the lowest tier of perception (AOR = 0.43). Such trends are in line with those of Solt [34] and Janmaat and Hoskins [35], who reported that economic inequality is linked to the political alienation of disempowered groups. Political cynicism among adolescents in Bangladesh is likely an aggregation of exposure to corruption, electoral irregularities, and the suppression of dissent. However, engagement, including critical engagement, seems to have a cognitive counterbalancing function against even the lowest ratings of inequality perception, possibly a sense of agency or a systematizing perspective on systemic issues [22].

Media tastes added value to the perception of inequality in a manner that varies according to the type of content. Teenagers who favored political content were 44% more prone to recognize high levels of inequality, which is consistent with the fact that exposure to political talk sensitizes audiences to distributional concerns [36]. Greater odds of high-quality perception and lower odds of low-quality perception were also found for recreational content preference, perhaps because of ambivalent or avoidant exposure to economic realities. The previously noted correlation between Facebook/X use and increased chances of the poorest perception of inequality should be approached with much caution: ideologically neutral information spaces created by the algorithms on these sites could be naturalizing inequality instead of criminalizing it [37–39]. These results highlight the need to focus on media literacy programs that address platform-related critical consumption as well as the ability to detect politically meaningful content.

The results of the mediation analysis revealed that the influence of gender on PEIS was completely mediated by trust in the judiciary, police, TV news, and newspaper news. This sample of female adolescents had less institutional trust than their male counterparts did, and institutional trust was positively related to PEIS scores. This implies that the relatively lower, although not insignificant, perceived inequality score of females compared with that of males is not the manifestation of less sensitivity to economic inequalities as such but rather different placement in relation to formal institutions. This discovery is echoed by Boned-Gomez et al. [40], who reported discrepancies in the awareness of social and economic sustainability among adolescents. Further study is needed to determine whether the lower institutional trust among female adolescents is a result of exposure to gendered discrimination in public services—a probable cause of patriarchal institutional environments such as those in Bangladesh.

High inequality was much more likely in adolescents living with their families (AOR = 2.20), which contradicts the expectation that family co residence is a protective buffer. This implies that instead, households talking about economic crisis, parenthood joblessness, or inequitable reception of governmental services actively socialize teenagers into a greater consciousness of economic inequality [41, 42]. This good relationship between social organization participation and high perceived inequality (AOR = 1.28) also indicates that civic participation increases the prism through which adolescents see structural disadvantage [43].

These results are understood in terms of a number of limitations. The cross-sectional study design does not allow causal inferences to be made; it is impossible to determine whether institutional trust is a cause or a consequence of the perceptions of inequality and in what order. Although the online survey method was suitable for the sociodemographic target population, the PEIS scores may have been overrepresented by urban and more digitally connected and higher-income teens, which can be an upward biasing factor. Self-report measures are vulnerable to social desirability and recall bias, especially for politically sensitive items in a prerevolutionary setting. The concentration of the sample in the Chattogram and Dhaka divisions (91.9%) restricts the external validity of the sample to other areas. The PEIS and institutional trust items have not been confirmed in Bangladeshi adolescent samples using

confirmatory factor analysis, but the Cronbach's α and pilot testing indicated sufficient reliability. Future studies must utilize longitudinal designs to measure the changes in attitudes before, during and after the July Revolution; incorporate qualitative designs to learn more about the experiential foundation of inequality perceptions; expand geographical locations; and validate PEIS psychometric measures through confirmatory factor analysis on culturally diverse Bangladeshi samples.

5. CONCLUSION

Most of the Bangladeshi adolescents sampled in the months before the July 2024 Revolution experienced high economic inequality. The main determinants of the intensity of these perceptions were residence, academic stream, institutional trust, political engagement, and media consumption. Institutional and media trust completely mediated the impact of gender, indicating the sociopolitical and not entirely demographic character of inequality perceptions. These results identify three policy priorities: enhancing the openness and accountability of the judicial and law enforcement system to restore adolescent confidence; introducing social justice, critical media literacy, and civic education to secondary and higher-secondary education; and addressing structural inequalities, especially in urban districts and poorly served rural communities, with progressive fiscal policy and equal access to the delivery of state services. As Bangladesh continues with its postrevolutionary transition, it is important to comprehend and rectify the socioeconomic complaints of its youngest population to develop sustainable democratic institutions and a just society.

Declarations

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Noakhali Science and Technology University (Reference code: NSTU/SCI/EC/2023/180). All participants provided informed electronic consent prior to completing the questionnaire. For adolescents under 18 years of age, additional consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Figures

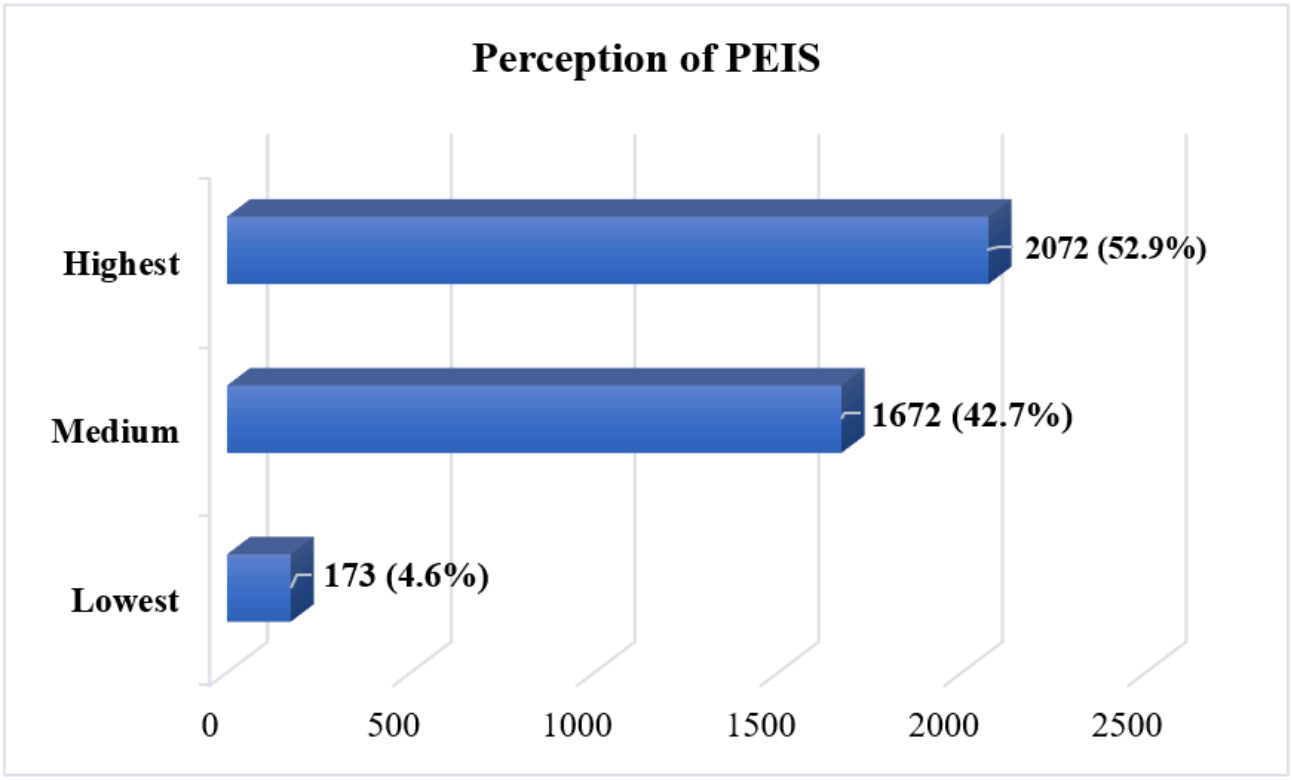


Figure 1

Perception of PEIS

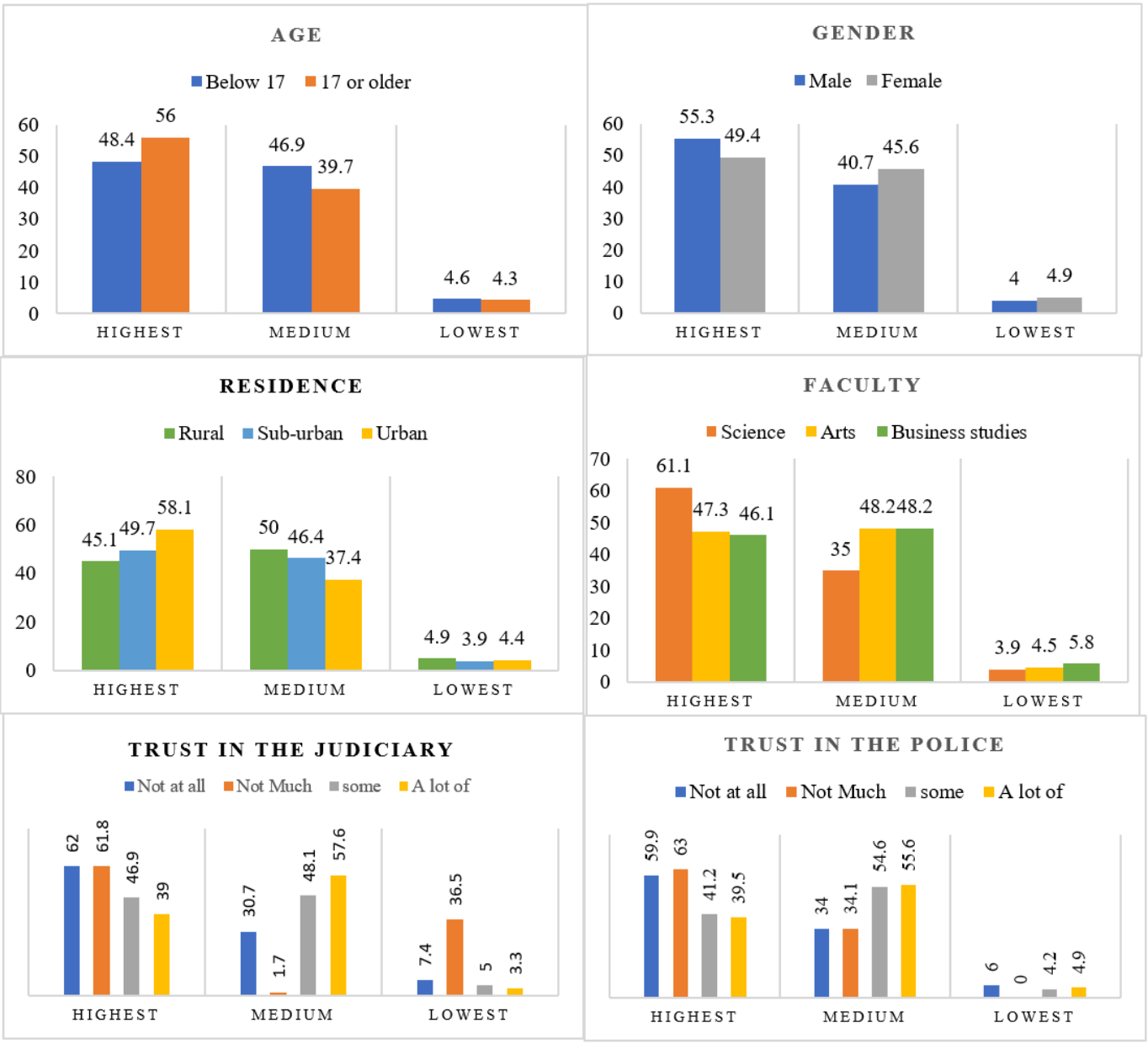


Figure 2

Percentages of perceptions among age, gender, residence, faculty, trust in the Judiciary, and trust in the police

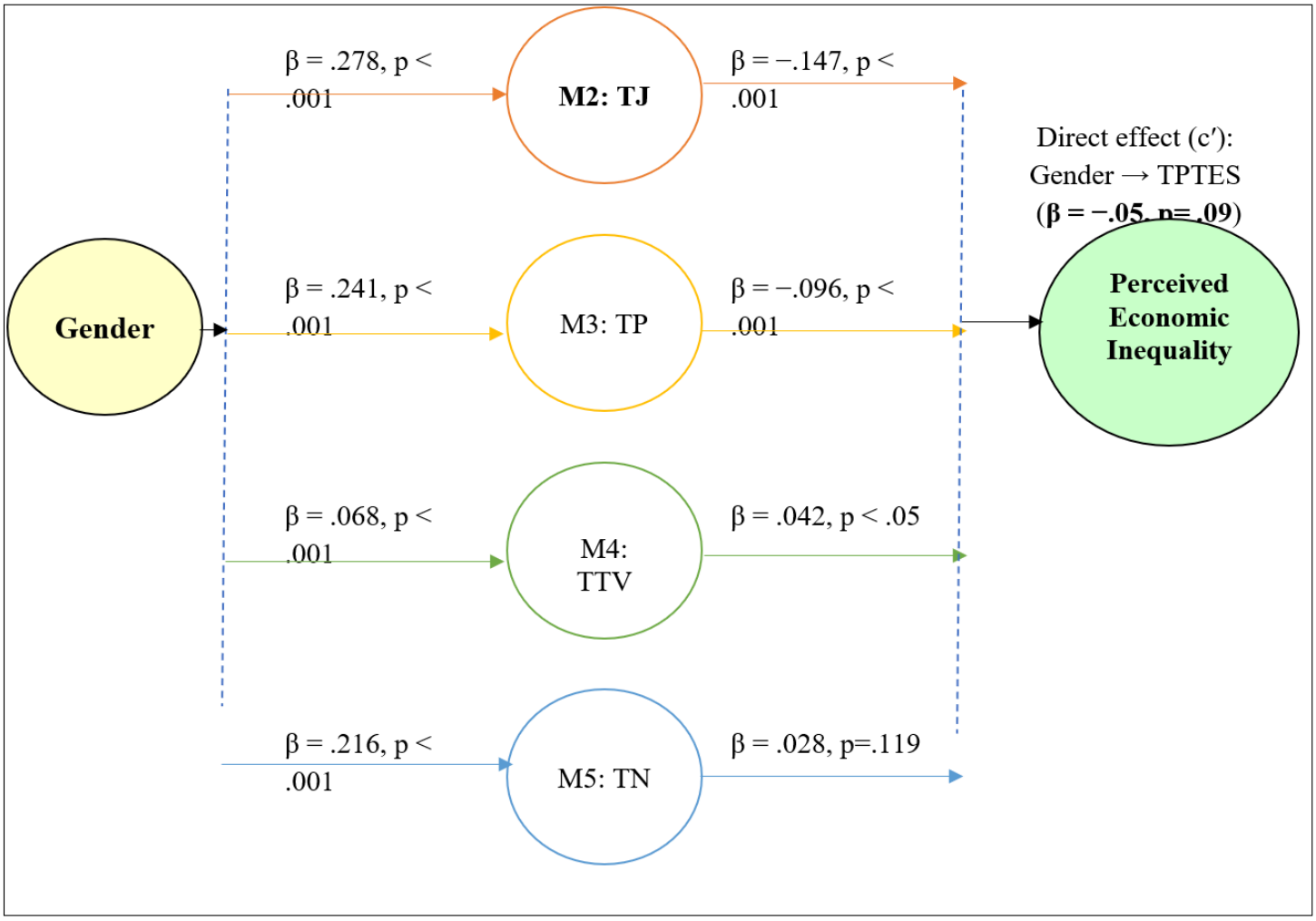


Figure 3

Mediating effect of trust in the Judiciary (TJ), Police (TP), TV (TTV), and newspaper news (TN) between gender and perceived economic inequality (PEIS).