



October 2023

Why do social norms matter?

Young people's realities on dignified work in Uganda



Key messages

- Young people in Uganda, have a clear understanding of and desire to engage in dignified and fulfilling work. Young people define such work as satisfying, earns one a source of livelihood, involves respect and accommodative to vulnerable groups including persons living with disabilities, and challenges gender biases and inequality.
- Young people's perceptions of dignified and fulfilling work are greatly informed by the social norms including gender division of labor, leadership expectations, the public and private divide expectations in the specific contexts.
- For young women, dignified work involves safety in and out of the workplace, inclusion of the differently abled persons, and recognition and accommodation of non-paid work. Young men are socially expected to be the protectors.

This policy brief is derived from a youth-led participatory research project on young women and men's aspirations and resilience conducted in Uganda. The project running from 2021 to 2024 has examined aspirations, resilience, and adaptability of young women and men, and explored the policy implications of the aspirations towards access to dignified and fulfilling work. This brief specifically focuses on how social norms influence young people's perceptions of dignified and fulfilling work.

What are social norms?

Social norms are unofficial rules that prescribe how people are expected to behave in each culture. They set what societies consider appropriate conduct within group settings but also for individuals. Social norms further set avenues to reward adherence and punish non-conformity to expected behavior. They consist of what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Social norms are indispensable for human survival as they lay the foundation for culture, language, the nature of social interaction, marriage and work. Social norms are therefore positioned at the intersection of behavior, beliefs and expectations. Social norms help communities and societies' function, binding them together and promoting collective behaviors. At times, however, the social order and community behaviors may reinforce unequal power dynamics and lead to discrimination, and social and gender inequities.

Social norms relating to work in Uganda

Uganda is a socially diverse society and social norms vary by region and culture. It can be generalized that, though women and girls face social norms that hinder their involvement in the workforce¹ Such norms are not only gendered but also age specific. They include early and at times forced marriages, gender-based violence, limited access to education, movement and networking. In the rural areas, women are further expected to concentrate on reproductive roles around the domestic space while men work in the public sphere. Young people are further expected to seek and adhere to guidance from elders, they are further expected to contribute to the development of the general community and be in good standing as it is considered a source of social capital. Such norms limit individual preferences and choices by the young people as collective responsibility may override the individualistic one.

Social norms and young people's perceptions of dignified and fulfilling work

Dignified work refers to work that is safe, secure and providing a living wage. It involves access to and control over decent work but goes beyond the workplace to explore attitudes and norms which may hinder entry and retention at the workspace for young people.

Social norms are important and majority of young people in Uganda observe such norms in their understanding of dignified work. One of the important social norms are gender norms, which refer to collective beliefs and expectations within a community or society, at a given point in time, about what behaviors are appropriate for women and men, and the relation and interactions between them. Some, however, disregard norms and prioritize their individual interests amidst public criticism. For instance, some youths were involved in socially unacceptable and stigmatized behavior for example sex work. Gender norms constrain what individuals aspire to be and the choices they make, such as education and career choices.

Findings from our study show that young people conceptualize dignified employment in multiple and diverse ways including economic and social aspects. It includes work which offers good pay, facilitates personal and career growth and development, enables active participation and contribution to the community, and earns one respect.

Interestingly, young people in Uganda describe dignified work to be different from fulfilling work. Dignified work denotes issues such as respect accorded to employees and non-discriminatory practices at the workplace while, fulfilling work is where youths apply their talents and knowledge as they meet their financial and personal needs as well as the satisfaction they derive from such work. Dignified work is thus more of collective while fulfillment is individualized. Although it varied by region and location (urban and rural), both male and female young Ugandan's explained that dignifying work should be able to earn income that is capable to support their lives. Young people prioritize money over other aspects of integrity, collective responsibility and care. One participant elaborated that:

"We thought office jobs were most dignified, but these days we prefer something that gives us a living, so whichever work we do as long as we take something home, that's dignified employment. Somebody gets himself into a money deal, no matter the kind of deal as long as they are going to get money" - (Male participant-Isingiro)

Besides income generation, dignified work is largely perceived to be for the educated such as professional disciplines such as medical doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, lecturers and those in government offices and non-profit organizations. Such jobs are however, for a few lucky ones because the system is so corrupt in that for one to secure a dignified job, they must have social networks or pay bribes thus leaving many educated poor youths jobless². To attain fulfillment, many educated but unemployed youths opt for other jobs which they consider fulfilling such as sex work for especially females, travel abroad in search for employment, charcoal burning, night guards for the males and selling of food and working in bars to earn a living. One participant elaborates on sex work:

"Some people think it's the bad girls that go for prostitution. That's what they think. But how can one get fulfilled if they have no income, no job? Out of the desire (for fulfillment) one opts for prostitution due to lack of options. Prostitutes are not bad people as such, it is just an income generating activity hence satisfying..." - (Female participant- Sembabule).

Dignified and fulfilling work includes having a secure job. Males are socially expected to have permanent jobs as a way of fulfilling their responsibility as bread winners for the family and therefore must earn and provide. Security in this regard means being safe and with no fear of losing a job but also post-retirement

¹ CARE Uganda Brief

² The high price of finding public service work in Uganda (independent.co.ug)

benefits.

Due to the growing precarity and shrinking job space in Uganda, most young people tend to start their own jobs. In Uganda, over seventy percent (70%) of the population are young women and men below the age of 30 years. Over one million young people join the job market each year³ amidst high youth unemployment rate of 13.3%. (World Bank, 2020). Many resort to the informal economy⁴. Over 83.5% of the youth work in the informal economy as self-employed since it is largely unregulated. Due to socially dictated gender division of labor, young men prefer to engage in jobs like welding, electric wiring, and carpentry while young women engage in hair dressing, starting small restaurants. These jobs affirm socially acceptable gender roles. Young men and women define dignified and fulfilling work in relation to generating income in ways that maintain the social order.

In Uganda, both male and female youths attach almost the same value towards respect from employers in relation to perspectives of dignified work. Respect is manifested through the way employers communicate to the employees by using language that is respectful and recognizes the value that young people add through their expertise, skills and talents. Youth also yearn for jobs which attract respect within the society and in public spaces for example in churches, mosques and traditional ceremonies.

Among Ugandan youth, dignified work is considered as being less precarious. Female youths are risk averse, so they considered night jobs as less dignified as they risk being sexually harassed and abused. It was also revealed that social expectations require women and girls to stay at home at night to take care of their families to avoid violence within homes. Dignified jobs thus consider a safe environment in and outside of the workplace. One way this can be done is by providing appointment letters with laid out terms of reference for the employees. In describing undignified work, one explained:

“For me, the work I do I don’t have any appointment letter-they told me how much I would earn, and I started working. I learnt most of the things on job. I only get paid when I report for work. Whether I am sick, or I lost someone, or it rained, it is none of my boss’s business”.

³ UNDP (2021). *UNDP Initiatives for Youth in Uganda*. [UNDP-Youth-Initiatives.pdf](#)
⁴ Kagoye, R. (2022). *The informal economy and the law in Uganda*. *International Lawyers assisting workers network. The-Informal-Economy-and-the-Law-in-Uganda-Updated-12082022.pdf*

The policy brief was written by Victoria Flavia Namuggala, PhD, Monica Nabukalu, Sally Geraldine Nagawa (Makerere University), Uganda Country Team, and edited by Joel Otieno and James Ochieng (PASGR). It has been produced as part of the Africa Youth Aspirations and Resilience (AYAR) research in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. AYAR is a three years’ research and uptake project that aims to understand youth aspirations, resilience and perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work. Project is implemented in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal.

Disclaimer

The views expressed do not necessarily represent the views or policies of PASGR and the Mastercard Foundation.

Accessibility of the workplace also described dignified work. Workspaces that are all-inclusive and accommodative to differently abled persons, for instance, the physically disabled, as well as the deaf, and expectant mothers. Dignified work thus involves use of sign language, interpreters as well as access routes for the physically challenged persons. Such work should be non-stigmatizing and acknowledge differences among persons.

Conclusion

The study observes that young peoples’ perceptions of dignified and fulfilling work vary from the standardized understanding of the concept. Young peoples in Uganda conceptualize dignified and fulfilled as different but complementing concepts. These further vary by gender, levels of education, and location. Importantly, social and cultural norms greatly influence young peoples’ perceptions relating to dignified and fulfilling work. Majority conform to societal expectations towards the nature of work young men and women get involved in. There are rare cases of non-conforming youth that prioritize their individual preferences over the collective social and communal demands.

Policy Recommendations

- **Support** young people to start and own their business/ job. This allows independence and lends them control of their futures. The support can be in the form of financial capital, knowledge and information on business management, as well as skills training.
- **Mindset change:** It is necessary to commit to long-term and continuous engagement at various levels including family and community levels to shift young peoples’ mindsets relating to work norms. Gender biases towards work need to shift towards more inclusive approaches to roles and responsibilities.