

Threatened Aspirations, Undaunted Resilience:

Nigerian Young Women's and Men's Prospects for
Livelihoods, Employment and Accountability



A Country Abridged Report
(Nigeria)

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Background

Nigeria is one of the most vulnerable African countries whose young people are believed to be facing many challenges such as unemployment, threats to business, and insecurity among others. Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to have further compounded the challenges. With a population of above 206 million people, out of which the youth population comprises over 70% of the current figure, Nigeria has a demographic structure with some important implications:

- i. It suggests that Nigerian youths constitute a significant segment of the country.
- ii. The large youth population, mostly people between ages 15 and 35, are faced with the highest rate of unemployment, amounting to 64% of the total national unemployment (Mboho 2021; O'Neill 2021). The situation has further been compounded by the vagaries of COVID-19.

However, pre- and post-COVID, Nigeria has continued to enact some youth-specific policies and programmes with far-reaching impacts such as job creation, social welfare and political participation. This situation has created a context that presents both opportunities and challenges that have implications for young women's and men's aspirations, resilience and adaptability as they continue to pursue dignified livelihoods in the post-COVID era. This situation required a country-specific study that presents empirical evidence to guide policy action that effectively strengthens the identified opportunities and addresses the challenges.

Study Objectives

This study was carried out to investigate the aspirations and resilience of young women and men in Nigeria. The study explored the gender and social norms that explain the aspirations of young women and men and assessed the policy and regulatory environments for supporting youth aspirations, especially in the context of the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualised young women's and men's aspirations as their quest for improved living conditions or status in society; a process of young peoples' wishing and envisioning what they would like to be in the future. It is defined as the driving force behind a young person's life path and well-being. Young women's and men's resilience was conceptualised as their ability to deploy resources to navigate through various obstacles to achieve their aspirations, while adaptability is defined as young women's and men's capacity in the post-covid era to influence and manage their resilience in their bid to avoid getting undesirable outcomes. It was projected that the extent to which young people can manage and influence their resilience determines the nature of the outcome they get in their aspirations for good livelihoods in the post-COVID era.

Methodology

Through a concurrent mixed-methods design that combined youth-appropriate quantitative survey and qualitative research approaches (Focus Group Discussions—FGDs, Youth Panel Discussions—YPDs, In-Depth Interviews—IDIs, and Key Informant Interviews—KIs), data were collected by stratifying the country into its six existing geopolitical zones: South West, South East, South-South, North West, North Central, and North East. Quantitative data were collected from 1,660 survey participants (young women and men), while qualitative data were obtained from 18 sessions of FGD, six sessions of YPD, 15 IDIs, and nine KIs among young people and stakeholders.

Key Findings

Youth-hood and aspirations

Nigerian young women and men defined youthhood in terms of age and physical agility as over 50% of the participants considered persons between 18 and 40 years as youths, while they also described youths as a group of active people with high energy levels, potential, and drive for adventures. In addition to the demographic and physical attributes, youthhood is a period of political activism. As submitted by Nigerian young people, proper young women or men do not

constitute burdens, but useful resources. Some markers of a proper youth include *a good sense of industry, a commitment to contribute to the betterment of society, a high moral standard, and self-confidence*. Contrary to the popular gender norm that women are weak, the youths believed that women are strong and independent.

Only one out of 10 of the youths surveyed admitted that they had already attained the kind of success they aspired to in life. However, about 6 out of 10 indicated that they were closer to living a successful life, while about 3 out of 10 attested that they were still far away from the realization of a successful life.

Among the young people interviewed, financial stability ranked highest among the indicators of success quantitatively assessed in this study as the majority (52.0%) of the respondents considered being financially stable (rich) as the topmost success priority. However, gender-specific analyses and voice disaggregation (see Fig. 1) showed that of all the indicators of aspirations assessed, the topmost aspirations of young men in order of priority were to be financially stable and rich (56.7%), have a good job (45.2%), create good business (45.1%) and providing family support (42.7%).

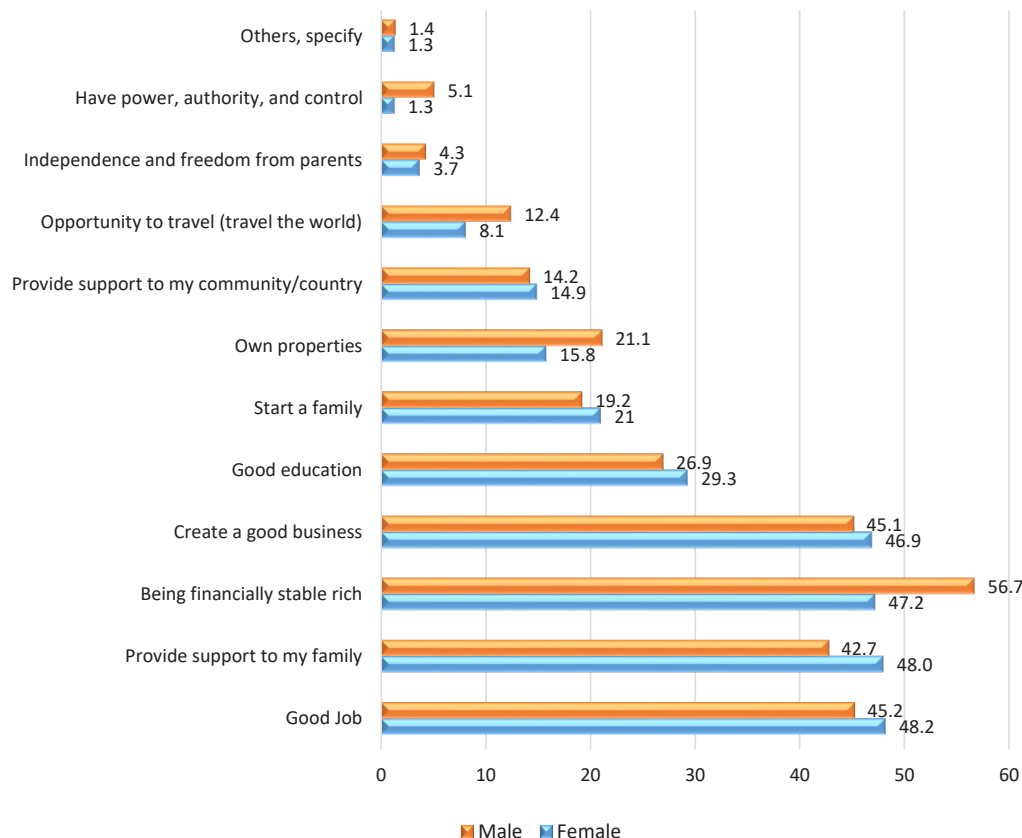


Figure 1: Top success priority by gender

Multiple responses

On the other hand, the topmost aspirations of young women in order of preference were to have a good job (48.2%), provide family support (48.9%), be financially stable and rich (47.2%) and a good business (46.9%). Surprisingly, although young women (29.3%) and men (26.9%) generally considered good education as a means to achieving good livelihoods, the desire to have a good education as a means to achieving their aspirations was relatively low among young men.

Youth perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work

Nigerian young women and men considered jobs that offer good income and financial opportunities for them to pay their livelihood bills and have sufficient savings for themselves and their dependents as dignified and fulfilling work. Both young women and men, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion, and location of residence, held similar perspectives of dignified and fulfilling. The following position of one of the female respondents from southwest Nigeria accurately captures the consensus perspectives of young people on dignified and fulfilling jobs:

Dignified and fulfilling work is something that

can give young women and men a good life, a good standard of living... they can live in a comfortable place like they can afford to rent the flat of their choice, drive their cars, you know, and stay in a good environment (Female, KII, South-West)

As established in the findings, among the survey respondents, nearly equal percentages of young women (33.3%) and young men (33.6%) ranked a job that pays well as dignified and fulfilling work. In the same vein, nearly equal percentages of rural youths (33.4%) and urban youths (33.5%) ranked a job that pays well as dignified and fulfilling work (see Figure 2).

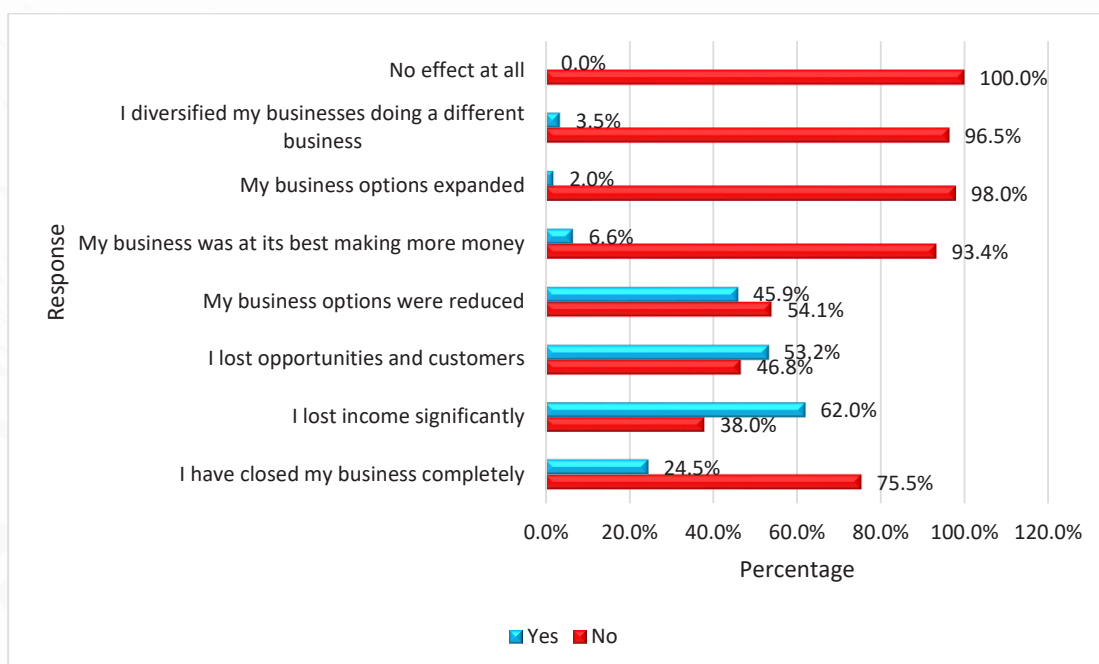


Figure 2: Comparison of young Nigerian women and men's ranking of indices of dignified and fulfilling work (n=735)

Besides, Nigerian young women believed that dignified and fulfilling work must be such that provides job security; adds to their honour, reputation, prestige, and dignity; and does not expose the workers to harm and discrimination as a result of gender, religion and ethnicity.

Also, Nigerian young women and men say they need funding, training, and enabling policies to access dignified and fulfilling work. “The funding (provision of capital) is needed to start and/or expand businesses. It could be in cash or kind” (Female, FGD, South-South). One of the interviewees, a young man from northern Nigeria, who is into farming, succinctly summarised it thus:

One needs money to do something really good...If you want to have a farm, you will need money for fertilizer and stuff like that. (Male, IDI, North-West).

A Female participant from South-East Nigeria said “It would be great if NGOs and governments could provide seminars and workshops for the youths”.

Barriers to Youth Aspirations in Nigeria

Insecurity and poor business environment negatively affected the aspirations of Nigerian young men and women in different ways. Compounding the existing problem was the COVID-19 pandemic which most of the youths (79.0%) running businesses indicated that it affected their businesses compared to pre-COVID 19 era. The major effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on youths’ businesses was a significant loss of income and this was experienced by over 60.0% of the youth. More than 5 out of 10 young people lost opportunities and customers, and business options were reduced by about 45.9% (See Fig. 3).

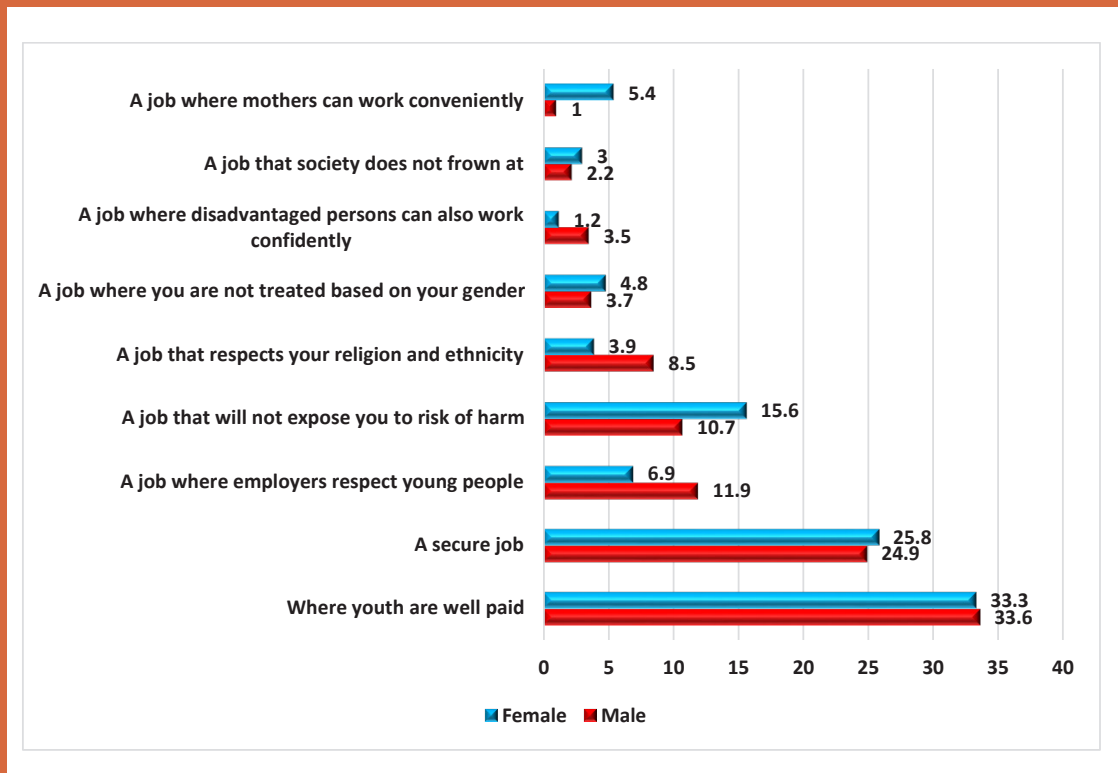


Figure 3: How COVID-19 affected youths' business (n=710)

Youths who had to close down their businesses completely were about 25.0%. The trend brought an increase in unemployment, crime rates, domestic violence and poor business patronage. Generally, young women and young people in the rural segments of the country experienced fewer job opportunities than men and urban youths, respectively during the pandemic. However, the effects of the pandemic were not the same for young women and men. More specifically, young women experienced more emotional trauma: They

were constrained to stay at home to take care of their children and in the process, many of them fell victim to rape and other forms of domestic crimes.

Myriads of insecurity issues such as Boko Haram, kidnapping, farmer-herder-conflict and ritual killings negatively affected Nigerian young people's aspirations. Insecurity issues forced many young people to close their businesses, abandon their farmlands or escape to safer regions. Because of lack of money.

Table 1: Barriers to Youth Aspirations

Young women's views	Young men's views
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of jobs, loss of business and inability to pay loans was experienced and young women who were in business had experienced losses that disrupted their aims. One of them asserted, "Someone like me collected a loan in 2019 to improve my business but due to COVID-19 I haven't been able to pay back the loan up till now and even what I invested the money on did not yield anything tangible because of the lockdown," a sentiment agreed by others. "It wasn't a good experience at all and I was affected as well, I lost my job because I was working with the hospitality industry and I said I can start up a business myself." These losses had financial implications. Vilification due to religious beliefs is also a barrier to youths' aspirations. There is a prevalence of stigmatization of Islamic adherents, especially Muslim women who wear hijab in public spaces, "that we cover our head does not mean our brain is covered." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth who used to be able to go and study, for some of them study and work suddenly found themselves not being able to do that, of course, they could study at home but work became something else With the COVID-19 pandemic, [and youth] not being able to move far from their locals (immediate communities), they would end up becoming a problem in their residential neighbourhood. A female can easily call on someone for assistance and the person would understand. But men are full of ego and they would be dying and not be able to open up so that someone can help them out and even if they open up, not everyone has the mind to help a man. I think men face a lot." "[There is bad governance, bad governance in every sense of it, no assistance or little to no assistance like grants, and also you can talk about corruption when we are living in a society that when the budget that is made for education, somebody is sitting on it." "No stability in the country today, no stability in the sense that there is nothing to work with long term. Maybe, for instance, price structure, you cannot work with a certain price cost analysis as a youth doing business in the long term because the market is so unstable." Unfriendly environments constitute great bottlenecks for the people living with disabilities in Nigeria.

Both young women and men identified unfriendly environments, religious discrimination, unstable economy, loss of jobs and business, and bad governance as the major barriers to their aspirations (see Table 1).

Youth resilience and adaptability strategies

Both young women and men demonstrated high levels of resilience and adaptability. They reiterated that notwithstanding the challenges of natural disasters and man-made obstacles that threatened their aspirations, it is still possible for them to adapt and achieve success and a good life. The youths hinted that hard work, commitment, perseverance, patriotism, and focus on one's goals are required to achieve success in life.

However, young men significantly differed from young women in their resilience and adaptability levels. Nigerian young men, compared to young women, demonstrated stronger resilience and adaptability traits: they showed stronger desires to take risks and try out new things. Interestingly, we discovered that (challenges (natural or man-made) provided the opportunity for young women to try their hands at some of those jobs once socially prescribed for men, thus providing a basis to challenge some of the existing gender norms.

Recommendations

Recommendations for programmatic and strategic action

- This study has established that what the youths need is a 'push' in the form of assistance and empowerment from the government, donor agencies and non-governmental organizations. Development organisations' interventions should address digital skills acquisition, empowerment for private businesses, agriculture, and job creation, which are crucial to young people's aspirations.
- Compared to young men, young women were more traumatised during the pandemic. Besides, young women, compared to young men, have demonstrated weaker resilience and adaptability capabilities. Therefore, interventions and empowerment programmes should give priority to young women.

- Young people in rural areas have relatively limited capabilities and opportunities to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic. Therefore, priority should be given to them during intervention programmes.
- Nigerian young women and men deployed their digital skills to cope with the impact of COVID-19. Therefore, there is a need for provisions for opportunities for the acquisition of digital skills by young people as a way of empowering them.

Recommendations for policy and practice

- Young people in Nigeria ventured into agriculture, small business and digital skill acquisition as survival strategies during the pandemic. Governments should, therefore, provide financial assistance and training for small businesses, agricultural businesses/investments, and the digital industry.
- Government policies seeking youth empowerment should consider gender norms by giving priority to young women who were more vulnerable during disasters, especially given the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Young women and men in the rural areas of the country were found to be more vulnerable with limited opportunities and weaker adaptability capacity. Therefore, government policies and interventions aimed at empowering young people should prioritise rural young people.

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