

Young Women & Men's Aspirations & Resilience in Uganda

Prospects for Livelihoods,
Employment and Accountability
before, during and beyond
COVID-19 Pandemic

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ACRONYMS

CDO	Community Development Officer
CVA	Capabilities and Vulnerabilities Approach
DCDO	District Community Development Officer
DEO	District Education Officer
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
MAKSSSREC	Makerere University School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee
MGLSD	Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development
SCDO	Senior Community Development Officer
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UNCST	Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UPE	Universal Primary Education
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study examined young women's and men's aspirations, resilience, and adaptability towards dignified and fulfilling work with a special focus on their experiences during and after COVID-19 pandemic. The study covered five regions, taking two districts from each region. These are Isingiro, Kanungu (Western region), Gulu, Amuru (Northern region), Soroti, Serere (Eastern region), Kiboga, Butambala (Central region), Ssembabule and Rakai (Southern region). The study adopted a gender and social inclusion approach. It covered young women and men between 18 and 35, key technical personnel directly working with a youth component in government, the private sector, development partners, NGOs and civil society at both district and national levels.

The study used a concurrent mixed methods approach involving quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Surveys, interviews and focus group discussions were primary data collection methods. The study further benefited from a review of current literature using a political economy analysis framework. The research also used innovative ways of community engagement under the Utafiti Sera approach, which facilitated knowledge co-creation among different actors and entities. The study adopted an intersectional approach to understanding the lived realities of young people in Uganda.

KEY FINDINGS

Conceptualization of youth

The participants conceptualized youth differently from the standardized (national, regional, and global) notions emphasizing the numeric age understanding of youth. Participants related youthhood to independence, responsibility, and physical strength. The concept is further biased towards maleness and masculinity.

Youth Aspirations

The study findings indicate that young women (65.7%) and men (63.6%) highly aspire to invest in business. Young people preferred self-employment (56.4% for females and 55.5% for males) to being employed by the public sector, private sector, international NGOs and institutions, and family businesses (43.5 for females and 44.9 for males). It was, however, also true that the majority of the participants (61.8%) were not running any business at the time of the study. The qualitative data corroborated quantitative data and showed that self-employment was desired to be more accommodating to one's tight schedule and other social dynamics/demands in society. For instance, self-employment has flexible working hours (reporting and departure time). Young females also indicated some degree of independence from their husbands in running their businesses.

Understanding of success

Overall, young people in Uganda attributed success to having money and a stable income. Both male (58%) and female (57%) youth considered success as being financially stable and rich. Although money was central, some young people also deemed a successful life as one in which an individual has accumulated wealth and property. Property accumulation was emphasized by young men (44%), particularly in the form of productive assets and resources like land, animals, buildings, farms, and owning a home.

To attain a successful life, both young women (50%) and men (48%) demonstrated a need for credit and loan services. Young men were more interested in income assets at 31% compared to young women at 25%. The young people demonstrated less interest in migration, with the highest being 7% in the northern region. The qualitative interactions revealed further that young people in

the northern region were interested in travelling to pursue an education in "good" schools following over two decades of war in the region which affected social service delivery generally.

There were numerous challenges related to attaining the youth desired future which included conservative social norms and values reflected in gender roles and social expectations, conditioned support for youth for instance requirement of collateral from youth to access government loans, the current nature of work that young people are involved in. It was noted that most youth are involved in informal employment which is hand-to-mouth and thus very hard to save, in addition to being precarious and insecure. Others noted climatic conditions as a huge hindrance especially for those working in agriculture and agro-related enterprises. Structural hindrances included corruption as well as pandemics including COVID-19.

COVID-19's Impact

The impact of COVID-19 was overall negative for young people, resulting in loss of livelihoods, early marriages and parenthood, school dropouts and involvement in risky survival ventures, including sex work. The pandemic also led to psychological effects such as depression and gender-based violence. Notwithstanding the above, there were some positives, including young people becoming more innovative and creative. They adopted new modes of technological use, including online schooling and businesses. Urban-rural migration facilitated intergenerational cohesion and positive shifts in sociocultural norms relating to roles and responsibilities. These led to shifts in the gender division of labour as women took on previously masculinized roles like home provisioning while men embraced femininized roles like working in restaurants. There was also the formation of youth groups, which promoted unity and community safety networks and pooled labour and resources for productive work.

The study concludes that the transformation of the young people's situation in Uganda is a multisectoral venture, demanding holistic approaches from the government, civil society, religious and cultural institutions. A comprehensive understanding of the youth needs to be adopted for effective programming that appreciates the local and indig-

enous notions and contexts. The study demonstrated that young people are agentic and quickly adapt to global changes, including pandemics, economic depression, climate change, technological advancements and insecurity.

Finally, the study recommends strategic inclusion of young people in the planning and implementation of programmes and initiatives, especially those targeting children and youth. There is a dire need to centre youth-specific needs and aspirations in national planning as well as youth-led initiatives for ownership and sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Uganda has one of the youngest populations in the world with varied aspirations such as higher education and employment. Uganda's economy has maintained positive economic growth rates over the years. However, the country's pace of economic advancement has not transcended into commensurate growth of new employment opportunities. This has led to Uganda having the highest number of poor working youths resulting in youth unemployment and underemployment as the major challenge to youth aspirations. There is thus a need for studies on youth livelihoods and survival.

Like many other African countries, the major challenge for the youth in Uganda is unemployment. Uganda's GDP growth in the fiscal years before 2020 was 6.8% while in 2020 it shrank to 3.1% (World Bank, 2020) due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent measures including lockdowns.

Despite Uganda's economic growth (pre-covid), economic advancement has not transcended into growth of new employment opportunities. The pace of creating new employment opportunities has lagged the growth of labour force. Young people are a critical section of the labour force in Uganda. The country has one of the youngest populations in the world, with 78% below the age of 30 and more than half of the population below the age of 15 years (SUPRE, 2019). Unemployment is a big challenge since close to 400,000 Ugandan youth annually enter the job market competing for approximately 9,000 jobs (Magelah and Ntambirweki-Karugonjo, 2014). Location among other factors determines employment possibilities as urban youth are more likely to be unemployed than rural youth, yet young women are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to the males (Ahaibwe and Mbowa, 2014).

Despite policymakers in developing countries increasingly prioritizing productivity drivers, they have little information about young women and men's capacities, expectations, and opportunities (OECD Development Centre, 2020). Change in how young women and men enter and progress in the labour market could be realized by changing their interactions through investment in infrastructure and initiatives that address inequalities (Sumberg, 2020).

Government Policies and Frameworks for Youth

The government of Uganda has taken steps to encounter the youth unemployment challenge. It has initiated several programs and frameworks to handle the unemployment challenge. The youth question is handled through several sectors including the Ministry of Gender, Labor, Youth and Social Development, ministry of education and sports and other line ministries. The different policies and frameworks include the National Youth Policy (2001). The youth schemes in Uganda are based on the proposition that Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises can play a primary role in creation of employment. Government has embarked on approaches for job creation as a way of reducing poverty through increasing productivity, increasing employment elasticity and transforming economies. These include the National Youth Policy (NYP-2001), Uganda's Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP) and the Youth Livelihood Fund (YLF). These are designed to support young people to create employment through youth-led enterprises by extending grants and other support to small groups of young entrepreneurs, to help them to start small businesses and thus create employment for other young jobseekers. The programme is community demand-driven (CDD) and corresponds to local governments' needs. The overall goal of the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP) and Youth Livelihood Fund (YLF) initiatives is to enhance enterprise development, business skill training and eventual job creation for the youth through interest group strategies in various sectors (Makumbi, 2018).

The Government of Uganda has also adopted private enterprise development as a strategy for economic growth and job creation. The Private Sector Foundation Uganda (PSFU) was started in 1995 to administer and guide the development of the private sector. PSFU is mandated to cultivate a favourable environment for job creation, generate revenue and export promotion. The other roles PSFU performs include promoting entrepreneurship financing, and inclusive self-employment through youth groups, as well as economic independence of the young people. Micro-credit has generally been adopted as an anti-poverty strategy and widely used in poverty eradication programs

including; Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), Youth Venture Capital Fund (YVCF), Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), Poverty Alleviation Project (PAP) (1994), Entandikwa Credit Scheme (ECS) (1995), Northern Uganda Social Action Funds I & II (NUSAF I & II), Skilling Uganda (SU), and Youth Enterprise Scheme (YES).

To further improve skilling and encounter the mismatch between the type of education provided at schools and the requirements of the labour market, the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy (2019) was established. The TVET Policy supports the creation of needed employable skills and competencies relevant for the national transformational labour market as opposed to just acquisition of educational certificates. The policy emphasizes a flexible workplace-oriented (practical) delivery when juxtaposed with the theoretical knowledge acquisition under the current general education system and it shifts TVET management from the government-led to Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) delivery. While the government has realized that vocational training is key to fight youth unemployment, their approach is very often not enough as it focuses too much on vocational training, neglecting other equally important “soft” skills like having a positive attitude or entrepreneurship skills. Further, while skilling is encouraged, it is a gendered stereotypical concept that perpetuates ‘male’ superiority in technical-type subjects and which tends to be cultivated within the formal educational system (Eccles, 2011 cited in Spiliopoulou et al., 2018). The government has in addition promoted initiatives like export of labour as a solution to unemployment among the youth. Several youth have gone to the Middle East in search for employment despite reports of human torture and mistreatment.

Despite the various government and private sector led initiatives to handle youth unemployment in Uganda, statistics still indicate that youth unemployment is still a big challenge. Jobs are characterized by uncertainty and informality. More than nine out of ten (91.9%) young workers in Uganda are employed in the informal economy – typically in low- productivity self-employment (ILO 2019).

There is also dominance in agriculture. The highest proportion of young Ugandan workers are employed in the agricultural sector (57.2%), with the females accounting for 60% compared

to males at 40%. Agriculture is followed by the services sector (32.1%) and then industry (10.9%) (International Labour Organisation, 2017). In both informal sectors and agriculture, there is low productivity and consequently very low incomes. In Uganda, young people complain about lack of access to formal jobs, the uselessness of having graduated from university, and the prohibitive costs of sustaining employment.

Conceptualizing Youth in Uganda

Youthhood is variously defined depending on the context, including location and gender. For instance, the United Nations (UN) considers a youth as a person aged between 15 and 24 years (UN, 2013). However, the UN acknowledges that member states and other entities use different definitions due to varied circumstances and contexts. The African Union, based on the African Youth Charter, uses the concept “youth” and “young people” interchangeably to refer to persons between 15 and 35 years of age.

Numeric age conceptualizations provide universalistic and standardised approaches to youthhood. While this is useful, from a Ugandan indigenous perspective, they are limited in various ways, which downplays the role of socio-cultural perspectives reflected in functionality and rationality as influencers of identity formation (Morrow, 2013) and everyday lived realities (Njuguna-Mungai et al., 2021). The socio-cultural view of youth in Uganda is less reliant on numeric age but on functional and relational age as markers of transition from childhood to adulthood (Cheney, 2007; Namuggala, 2018).

In addition, at the national level there are contradictions in defining who constitutes a youth. Mandated by the constitution of Uganda (1995), the National Youth Council Act defines a youth as any person between the age of 18 and 30 years. This age bracket provides criminal responsibility which is a critical feature of youthhood in addition to growth and performativity which is culturally more important. The National Youth Policy (2001) on the other hand defines youth, all persons; female or males aged 10 to 30 years, while in the implementation of programmes, it extends to 35 years (NYP, 2007; UBOS, 2018). The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, (2001) further describes youthhood as a passage/ transition from adolescence to full adulthood.

Important for local contexts is the fact that the formal definitions do not necessarily depict the social-cultural understanding, expectations, and responsibilities relating to youth. While legal and policy understanding is critical for institutionalized and standardized definitions of a youth, relationality and functionality centrally inform the local understanding (Namuggala, 2018). Relationality is depicted in the social relations particular individuals forge irrespective of their numeric age, while functionality is depicted in the roles one performs within the community (Morrow, 2011). These shift beyond the individual to reflect the collective sense of belonging, identity and responsibility.

Based on the preceding discussion, this study, adopts an integrative view that conceptualizes a youth as anyone between the numeric age bracket of 18 and 35 years in line with the African Union (African Union, 2006) and the practical understanding of a youth nationally in Uganda (UBOS, 2018). This understanding shifts beyond the numeric age marker which is 18-30 years according to the 1995 Uganda constitution. The purpose is to enable us to address social-cultural perspectives which reflect the everyday lived experiences and realities of young people in Uganda. Such an understanding is holistic and appreciates numeric, functional, and relational notions of youthhood. The concepts “young people” and “youth” are thus used interchangeably in this study to refer to this population category.

Research questions

The following questions guided data collection. The study was guided by two central questions which are:

1. What are young women’s and men’s aspirations, and what adaptability and resilience strategies are employed in pursuing those aspirations, especially in the face of militating policy, pandemic and other challenging environments in Uganda?”
2. And what are the policy implications in relation to the young men and women’s aspirations in Africa?
3. The specific questions:
4. What are young women’s and men’s aspirations about their futures, and how have their aspirations and experiences shifted (or not) during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. What barriers do young men and women face in pursuing these aspirations?
6. Are the various provisions, regulations, and policies in Uganda aligned with or take into consideration the aspirations and ideas of young women and men regarding what work will look like in the future?
7. Are the various provisions, regulations, and policies in Uganda aligned with or take into consideration the aspirations and ideas of young women and men regarding what work will look like in the future?
8. What roles can various policy actors (the private sector, governments, young women, and men-led organisations) play to support fulfilling young men’s and women’s aspirations?
9. What are the social, gender norms and barriers young men and women experience in their lives and livelihoods in a COVID-19 world in Uganda?
10. What can we learn about the adaptability and resilience of young women and men’s aspirations?
11. How can the lessons learnt from young men and women inform policy action in Uganda?
12. What are the policy implications in relation to young men’s and women’s aspirations in Africa?

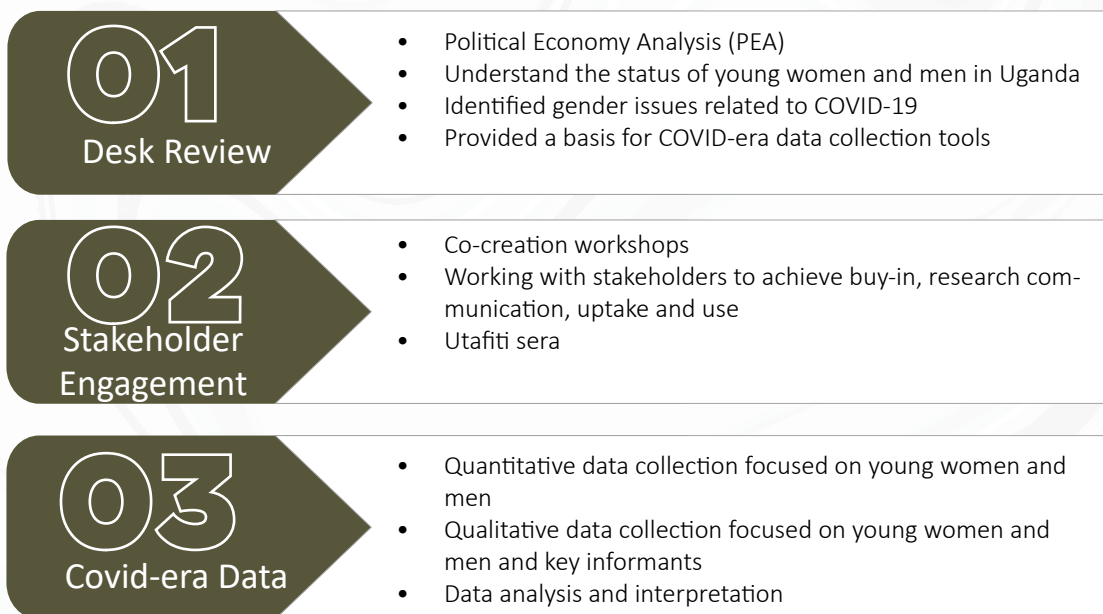
METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the concurrent mixed-methods approach (Bell et al., 2022) involving qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study was anchored on Utafiti Sera's model, a well-known and tested innovative approach for institutionalizing research-policy communities- Utafiti Sera (Utafiti Sera – Evidence Driven Policy Communities. (pasgr.org). Through the model, the study conducted a comprehensive political economy analysis (PEA) and mapped key stakeholders in the youth employment sector in Uganda based on their motivations, interests, capacity and power/influence. The Utafiti Sera model helped the study map the major key policy issues and how to address them and situate the study in contemporary, relevant discourse.

Description of Study Methodology

The study was divided into three phases with distinct but interconnected processes and outcomes: analysing qualitative data on young women and men's aspirations, COVID-era supplementary surveys and analyses, and working with stakeholders to achieve buy-in, research communication, uptake, and use.

Figure 1: Description of Study Methodology



The gender analysis and social inclusion frameworks guided the overall study. Gender analysis was crucial for explaining how and why there are social differences between young women and men (WHO, 2003). Specifically, the study used the Capabilities and Vulnerabilities Approach (CVA) (March et al., 1999) together with the intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1989). The capabilities and vulnerabilities approach was preferred as a gender analysis tool since it aids in characterising gendered relations in terms of roles and responsibilities, opportunities, entitlements and power dynamics (March et al., 1999). The approach further identifies the strengths and weaknesses of community categories that may affect social, political, economic and other development avenues (Birks, 2017). CVA helped assess the impact of COVID-19 on young people in Uganda, establishing their strengths (capacities) and weaknesses (vulnerabilities) and how they responded.

To complement the capabilities and vulnerabilities approach, the study adopted the intersectional framework. The approach recognizes the interconnectedness of marginalisation and experience of discrimination to one's simultaneous overlapping identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is thus crucial for studying gender, social inclusion, ethnicity, location, and marginalisation. For young people,

it's essential to understand the various positionalities they simultaneously occupy in society in relation to gender. This study examined multifaceted identity markers, including age, marital and parenthood status, education levels, residence, employment status, religion and region, and the various social and cultural norms, values and beliefs which influence their choices and decisions.

Study Sites

The study was conducted nationwide. For comparative purposes, both urban and rural sites in the different regions were strategically considered. Study participants were selected from five regions of Uganda. These include Western, Eastern, Southern, Northern and Central Uganda regions. From each region, two districts were selected, totalling 10 districts.

Table 1: Study area

	Region of Uganda	Districts Covered
1	Northern	Gulu and Amuru
2	Eastern	Serere and Soroti
3	Western	Kanungu and Isingiro
4	Southern	Rakai and Sembabule
5	Central	Butambala and Kiboga

Sampling

Quantitative sample

In total, 1,637 respondents (827 males and 810 females) participated in the study. Enumeration areas (EAs) were randomly sampled, including villages where the data collection was carried out. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) provided the sample frame which was used for this study. Enumerators selected households from the latest local council household lists through guidance from the local council leadership. With the updated household list, households were chronologically numbered and randomly sampled for the starting household. Later, systematic sampling was used until the final household was determined. Households with young people between 18 and 35 years were eligible for the survey. In households with more than one qualifying youth member, a piece of paper containing random numbers would be tossed to select one eligible respondent. We would alternate between male and female respondents in order to achieve uniformity between the genders, and in each village, we would select 10 males and 10 females, adding up to 20 respondents.

Qualitative sample

The qualitative phase included youth, government entities at the district and national level, civil society organisations and development partners. Participants were purposely selected with the aid of the local leadership to cater for the heterogeneous nature of the youth. Besides gender consideration, other critical identity markers were also considered for the participants, including marital status, (dis)ability, levels of education, location, employment status, and nature of employment. The key informants were purposively selected based on their positions and roles about youth programming at the district and national levels. At the district level, district community development officers, probation and welfare officers, youth district leaders, gender focal persons, and district education officers were interviewed. At the national level, key informants included development agencies like USAID-Uganda, the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development, and academia, totaling to 17 key informants. These included both women and men at different levels.

Table 2: Qualitative sample

Category	Category description
Youth	Young women and men (18-35 years), rural and urban, married, single, educated and illiterate
National-Level Government Entities	Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development, Academia
District-Level Government Officials	Community Development Officers, District Community Development Officers, Probation officers, Local Government Mayors, District Education Officers, District Youth councillors
Development Partners	USAID-Gender, Adolescent and Youth Advisor

Data collection methods

Quantitative data

The quantitative data was collected using a digital survey questionnaire powered by Survey CTO.

Qualitative data

The qualitative data collection involved Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). 21 gender-specific FGDs (10 females and 11 males) were conducted. At least two FGDs per district were conducted. Observation and photography were also used during data collection to capture data that could not be verbally represented.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the Makerere University School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee (MAKSSREC,) under reference number 09.21.505, and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) under reference number SS1093ES.

Ethical principles on research involving human subjects were observed. These included obtaining informed consent throughout the research process for participation as well as recording of discussions and taking of photographs, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality, respectful community entry and departure, as well as safety precautions amidst COVID-19 and Ebola pandemics. Permission was obtained from all participants, including the young men and women, as well as key informants, before collecting data. They were informed about the purpose of the research and how the data would be managed (used and stored). Participants were given assurances that

their participation in the research was voluntary and were free to opt-out at any time if they felt uncomfortable.

Data analysis and findings

This section presents the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data collected from the field. The section is structured in themes and sub themes to reflect the demographic characteristics of the study population, the study objectives and the key research questions. The major themes are the concept of youthhood, youth aspirations, the understanding of a successful life, requirements for attaining success, desired future employment, barriers to attaining success, perspectives on dignifying and fulfilling work, the impact of COVID-19 on aspirations and youth resilience and adaptability.

Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data were extracted from the Survey CTO server as an Excel file. This was then transformed into SPSS software (version 26) for analysis. The data was cleaned, and codes were developed for analysis.

Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data collected through interviews and focus group discussions was analyzed using thematic analysis. From the study findings, patterns, categories and themes of analysis were established basing on the study objectives and key questions. The new emerging themes were also considered. From the recordings, verbatim transcription of all the interviews and focus discussions was conducted. Transcripts were then thoroughly read several times to familiarise me with the data to make necessary comparisons. This facilitated

the research team to establish opinions and viewpoints relating to the objectives as they emerged from the texts. These themes were derived and grouped basing on the research questions which then guided report formatting and writing.

Demographic characteristics of study participants

Overall, the study had an equal representation of young women (50%) and men (50%). The study acknowledges gender as an intersectional concept that directly relates to and interacts with other critical identity markers. Besides gender, other critical identity markers such as age, marital status, employment type and future work were also considered during this study to ensure representation of the heterogeneous nature of youth in Uganda. It was noted that young people were not a homogenous category but rather a diverse group of people from different life backgrounds. They included in and out-of-school youth, the employed (formal and informal), unemployed, singles, married, educated, and illiterate, urban and rural. Most young men (72.6%) and women (69.9%) live in rural areas, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Participant Demographic Information

Characteristic	Male	Female
Region		
North	21.5%	22.8%
South	21.4%	21.1%
East	17.2%	17.2%
West	31.3%	31.2%
Central	8.6%	7.7%
Place of Residence		
Urban	27.4%	30.1%
Rural	72.6%	69.9%
Age of respondent in years		
17-19	13.1%	18.0%
20-24	30.1%	34.4%
25-29	28.4%	27.9%
30-35	28.4%	19.6%
Highest Education Level		
Primary	45.8%	45.9%
Secondary	37.7%	37.9%
Diploma	5.6%	5.2%
University	2.4%	3.2%
Post-graduate	0.6%	0.4%
Certification	5.7%	4.7%
No formal education	2.2%	2.7%
Marital Status		
Married	30.1%	35.4%
Living together but not married	18.3%	19.6%
Separated	5.6%	7.8%
Widowed	0.2%	2.0%
Divorced	0.2%	2.2%
Never married	45.3%	32.2%
Declined to respond	0.2%	0.7%
Total Percentage	100.0%	100.0%
Total Number of Respondents	827	810

Marital status: As Table 3 above shows, there is a significant variation in marital status between young men and women. There were more single males (45.3%) than females (32.2%). This confirms earlier findings from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, which noted that girls were getting married at the early age of 17 years (UBOS, 2017). It is also true that early marriages for young women in Uganda were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNFPA, UNICEF, 2022) as many adopted it as a survival strategy.

Employment Status: From Table 1 above, males have more chances for employment than females. By the time of the study, significantly more males were employed (56.2%) than females (40.2%). This agrees with other literature which highlights feminized unemployment and consequential poverty. Research shows that the unemployment rate was higher for women at 11.7%, while for men at 8.4% (ILO, 2022). The difference is attributed to social and gender norms, beliefs and practices (Oosterom et al. 2022), among other factors, including differentiated levels of education.

Education: Majority of the participants (45.9%) had attained primary education as their highest education level compared to university level (2.8%) and post-graduate (0.5%). Uganda

provides free primary education under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy, which could explain why most young people have primary-level certificates. Introduced in 1997, the government of Uganda, through the UPE policy, aims to reduce poverty and promote human development by equipping individuals with basic skills (Kan & Klasen, 2020). Under the policy, the government abolished school fees and Parent and Teachers Association charges to encourage all children to join schools. The policy has, however, been critiqued for increasing access and not the quality of education, as well as retention since only one out of four who enrol for primary level make it to the secondary level (UNICEF, 2020). The high dropout rate explains the decreasing number of youth at higher levels of learning, as evidenced by 2.8% of young people at the university level and 0.5% with post-graduate training in Table 1 above. Other factors explaining the high dropout rate include poverty as well as far distanced educational institutions. Some regions have more and higher quality education institutions which increase access and use of such services. Education thus varied by region, as the table below shows.

Table 4: Key Socio and Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents by Region

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Central</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>Total %age</i>
<i>Highest Education Level</i>						
Primary	42.1	43.8	37.5	44.8	54.7	45.9
Secondary	48.1	39.2	36.6	43.1	31.6	37.8
Diploma	2.3	8.9	8.0	4.9	2.7	5.4
University	0.8	3.6	6.1	2.0	1.2	2.8
Post-graduate	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.5
Certification	6.0	4.6	8.0	3.7	4.3	5.2
No formal education	0.8	0.0	1.7	1.4	5.5	2.4
<i>Total Percentage</i>	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Total Number of Respondents</i>	133	281	363	348	512	1,637

In Table 4 above, the Western region lagged in terms of education with the highest percentage of participants, with primary as the highest attained level of education (54.7%), followed by the South (44.8%), Eastern region (43.8%), Central region (42.1%) and Northern region (37.5%). This confirms qualitative data findings that the Northern region valued education more than the other regions, with the highest percentage of graduates, as Table 4 above shows.

People with disabilities (PWDs): During data collection, the research team also explored the aspect of (dis)ability among the young people who participated in the study. Most participants (over 95%) had no disability relating to either hearing, seeing, walking, memory, or self-care and thus had no difficulty towards their aspirations related to disability.

Table 5: Percentage of participants living with disability

Level of Difficulty	Hearing	Seeing	Walking	Memory	Communication	Self-care
No difficulty	98.1	96.0	94.8	95.8	98.3	97.0
Some difficulty	1.5	3.5	4.5	4.0	1.5	2.7
A lot of difficulty	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1
Cannot at all	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.2
I don't know	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total %age	100	100	100	100	100	100

While disability is a key inclusion measure, it was realised that in most cases such records are missing, especially at the district level. This makes planning for the most vulnerable youth categories complicated and at times disregarded which reinforces marginalisation and vulnerability. This concern was also clearly expressed in the various Utafiti-sera sessions where participants called for a holistic inclusion approach that prioritised the specific needs of individual youth living with disabilities in order to bring out their differentiated abilities and capabilities.

The concept of youthhood

The concept of youthhood was explored mainly in the qualitative phase of the study. Participants had varied views on what youthhood entailed. The emerging themes as markers of youthhood were independence, responsibility, physical strength, aspirations, access, use and control of productive resources, the pursuit of education and gender.

Independence

This meant individuals could decide on issues concerning them with limited consultation, adult guidance and supervision. Such decisions revolved around livelihoods and survival, for instance, income generation. It was noted that by age 15, many young people in the community had started 'hustling' and fending for themselves, making them responsible and independent members of society. Further, at 15 years old, parents see their children as grown-ups and engage them in hard labour. For instance, they dig to feed the family, do bricklaying, and herding animals. This involvement, which centres on functionality, basically defines a youth from the local perspective. The ability to perform tasks with minimal supervision elaborates on one being a youth and thus gradually transition into adulthood. This affirms earlier observations

by childhood scholar Morrow (2013) in her discussion around childhood, where she notes that functionality is more important than numeric age in determining childhood and adulthood in many of the African societies.

Youthhood as a biological construction

Some participants attributed youthhood to biological formations demonstrated in bodily energy and strength. One male participant explained their understanding in relation to strength and ability.

A youth here ranges from 15-45 years, because when you reach 45, you can no longer do things the youth do. For example, digging from morning to evening. It is hard to find a lazy youth. We are very energetic (Male FGD Kiboga district)

Strength and energy are socially termed as notions of male masculinity in Uganda (Park et al, 2022). This understanding is gendered and tagged youthhood to maleness and male masculinity. Male youth are socially expected to be strong and exercise their energy to defend themselves and the community. Youth are, therefore, expected to use their strength and fulfill all they commit themselves to in preparation for old age. By 45 years, energy levels start dwindling, hence the loss of youthhood.

Youthhood tagged to gender and responsibility

In emphasizing gender and responsibility as virtues of youthhood, other participants explained childbirth as critical in understanding youthhood. It was noted that women produce children early, which comes with responsibility and thus advancement to maturity irrespective of numeric age. One

explains;

It is not easy for people to think of women as youth since women are expected to act with respect and responsibility irrespective of their age. It is even harder when they have children, and become mothers, because you cannot be a “youth mother”
(Female FGD Serere district).

The understanding of youthhood, in this case, disregards the multifaceted nature of identity and belonging. Young mothers are, for instance, compelled to choose between being a mother or a youth and are not socially expected to be both. It is, therefore, true as previous literature reveals that single-identity social constructions result in self-exclusion from programmes intended to help youth (Namuggala, 2018).

Generational discrepancies on youthhood

There is a difference in the conceptualization of youth between youth participants and older participants/public officials. The young people define themselves in positive and liberating ways. For instance, physical strength is translated/interpreted in terms of hard work, persistence, and resilience against challenging situations. This is contrary to the elders’ (older generation) and public officials’ descriptions of a youth, which are laced with negative connotations, such as being lazy, disrespectful, and seekers of quick money. One community development officer said:

The youth and their mindset are a big problem. Many want free money from the government. They want to get into groups and hang out in the trading centres, playing board games instead of doing something productive
(CDO, Rakai district).

The above participant’s understanding of productivity is distanced from a youth. Youth consider team building productive as it forges networks, as discussed in the preceding sections, yet the participant in the above quote considers it time-wasting. As a public servant, their response is informed by the office they hold, which is responsible for distributing and monitoring government resources at the district level.

From the perspective of the key informants, youthhood was further associated with limited access to, use and control of productive and social resources, including land, houses, farms, culture,

family and even jobs. Many young people are idle, and that explains their reckless conduct in terms of drug use and abuse as well as involvement in crime. Amidst limited access to resources, young people demonstrate a strong desire for money, consequently leading them into non-dignifying jobs and non-dignifying conduct. Participants mentioned jobs like prostitution, the use and sale of drugs, including marijuana and *miraa* (khat), and undercover bars. Such jobs are considered non-dignifying because they do not command respect socially despite income generation. Those doing such jobs are stigmatized and, at times, demonized. The jobs were also considered to have long-term effects on the bodies of those involved, such as HIV/AIDS and cancer infections. Importantly, these jobs were performed entirely by young men and women.

Youth are further considered to be out of school. Going to school is considered an indicator of dependency, especially on parents and guardians, but also taking instructions from teachers. Due to the school institution, young people are not free and independent to act as they please. Schools dictate time use, dressing and hairstyles, and language. It further punishes non-compliance with rules, regulations, and divergent behavior and conduct. Being out of school permits young people to self-guide; hence categorized as youth.

Youth Aspirations

From the study findings, both young women (65.7%) and men (63.6%) highly aspire to invest in business. They also desire to be self-employed at 55.7%; it was, however, also true that the majority of the participants (61.8%) were not currently running any business. By aspiring to invest in business and be self-employed, it can be concluded that young people desire to be job creators, not seekers. This points positively towards reducing the high unemployment problem in Uganda.

Table 6 summarizes youth aspirations, indicating that most are interested in business and self-employment.

Table 6: Youth aspirations

Characteristic	Male	Female	Total %
Work aspiration			
Employment	13.5%	13.3%	13.4%
Business	63.6%	65.7%	64.6%
Both	22.9%	21.0%	21.9%
Satisfaction with current work			
Very satisfied	4.7%	3.5%	4.1%
Satisfied	19.4%	16.8%	18.1%
Neutral	14.1%	11.1%	12.7%
Not satisfied	31.0%	29.8%	30.4%
Very dissatisfied	3.8%	5.1%	4.4%
Not applicable	27.1%	33.7%	30.2%
Preferred employer			
Public sector (government)	22.7%	22.3%	22.5%
Private sector	7.7%	5.7%	6.7%
Self-employment	55.0%	56.4%	55.7%
International NGOs	6.4%	4.9%	5.7%
International institutions	2.3%	2.0%	2.1%
Family own business	5.8%	8.6%	7.2%
Currently running a business			
Yes	41.8%	34.6%	38.2%
No	58.2%	65.4%	61.8%

Young people preferred self-employment (55.5% for males and 56.4% for females) to being employed by the public sector, private sector, international NGOs and institutions, and family businesses (44.9 for males and 43.5 for females), as indicated in Table 6 above.

The qualitative data corroborated quantitative data and showed that self-employment was desired to be more accommodating to one's tight schedule and other social dynamics/demands in society. For instance, self-employment does not have defined working hours (reporting and departure time). Young females also indicated some degree of independence from their husbands in running their businesses. One participant explains why self-employment is preferred:

I think because businesses do not have strict public expectations, you can somehow run things at your own pace. So, women can make money (generate income) and at the same time manage their homes' (Female FGD, Butambala district)

Work flexible and accommodating to the dynamics of public and private space expectations is preferred, especially by women. As young women take on roles in public spaces, they are still expected to accomplish social expectations through marriage and other domestic roles and expectations. Young women are open to cultural diversity but are clear that getting married is a dream they hold. Marriage is a social expectation to be attained in many societies in Uganda (Stephens, 2016). It goes beyond the individual to involve families, clans, and the wider community.

Leadership as a youth aspiration

Young men were also keen on leadership as an aspiration. They aspired to be popular politicians, which they considered a form of employment. Politicians in Uganda are presented as not only prestigious and celebrities but also rich. Many young men detested the “old” local council politicians, unwilling to leave their positions for the young generation. Such leaders were considered barriers to young men’s aspirations and dreams of becoming leaders. Many aspire to become members of parliament, local council leaders, and youth representatives at different levels. Compared to the female youth, their aspiration for leadership was low because society viewed them as the best people to take care of the children. They had to concentrate on looking after the children who needed special attention from their mothers. More still, many females were single mothers, meaning they were playing different roles as sole parents, hence concentrating on how to help the children receive the basics and necessities of life as one female said:

You know, sometimes us females who give birth at an early age are judged by society. People say that we were not patient enough to get responsible husbands because those men after they have impregnated us disappear and so when you deliver, the child becomes your fulltime job and makes sure you work hard so that he/she doesn't lack. You can't think of something like joining politics or leadership positions as males because for them they have time to look for votes compared to us females
(Female FGD Sembabule district)

Educational requirements further inform political aspiration. In Uganda, it is a requirement for members of parliament to at least have an Advanced Level Certificate or its equivalence. While educated young men can dream of becoming members of parliament, the less educated are less likely to have such dreams as they are systematically restricted. While many male youth wanted to participate in political positions, some youth aspired to pursue other forms of leadership, including cultural and religious leadership. Those who prefer to assist others uplift their faith and live a non-troubled life. Desire to help others was, however, secondary to earning a living as servants of God:

I admire religious leaders, because I love speaking the truth...It is funny but some of those religious leaders do things normal common people cannot do. Myself, when I am troubled, I run to church. I would like to be that person that brings back hope to people that have lost it while I also earn a living
(Male FGD Serere district)

Some young people, especially from the northern region, considered attaining education an aspiration. Although many had not attended school due to the long civil war (Lord’s Resistance Army War-1986-2006), the northern region had a high percentage of university graduates at 6.1% and postgraduates at 2.2%, while all the other regions had none, as indicated in table 4. They treasured education and worked hard to be able to educate their children. In this case, aspiration is not self-centred but strategically stretches to the next generation. Many attributed their poor living standards to a lack of formal education, especially because of displacement. In other regions, especially central, southern, and western, qualitative data indicated that young people had lost enthusiasm for education due to rampant unemployment. They pointed to several of their educated (graduate) village mates who were struggling and could not find decent employment. They, however, observed that education accords respect to the youth, especially in rural areas. They considered those as viable options for structured formal education.

Young people’s perception of academic education was that it is expensive and non-rewarding in the search for jobs. Even when a job search is successful, the reward is not adequate. Some looked at vocational training and skilling to benefit from education and employment doubly. Youth preferred to be self-employed after hands-on training in courses like mechanics, tailoring, bakery, hair styling, and electrical engineering. They considered such vocational training and skilling as more assuring for one’s survival.

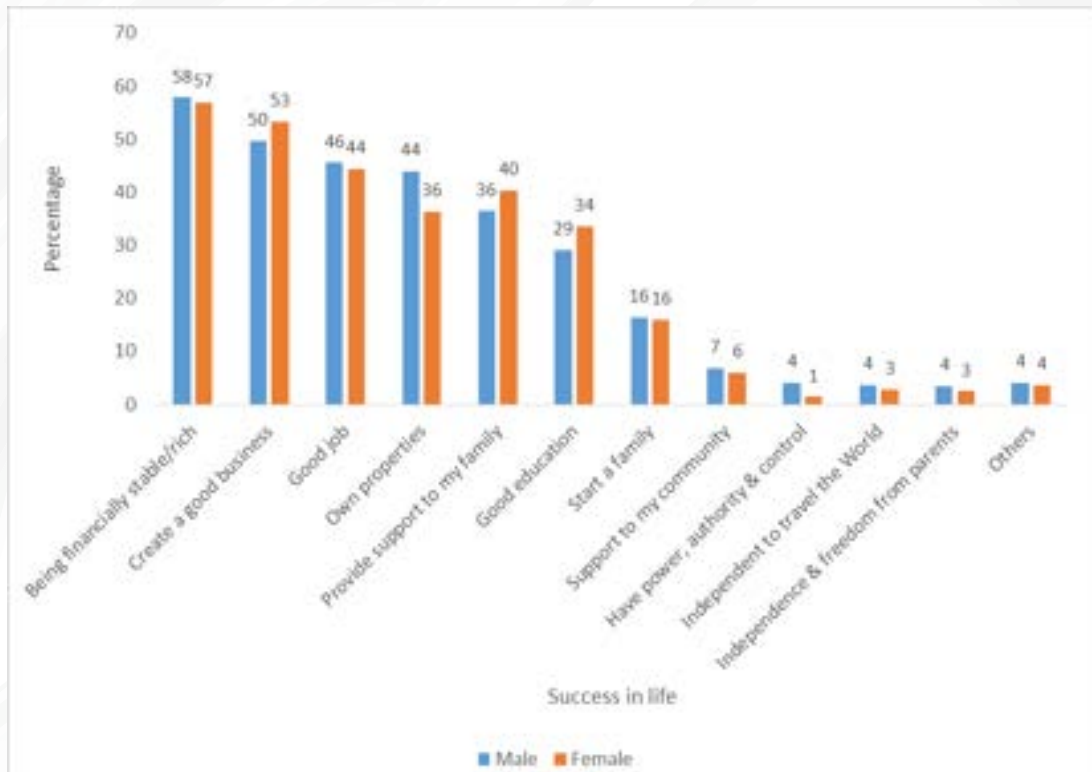
The Meaning of a Successful Life

In this section we present results of what young people consider a successful life. Findings indicate that young people in Uganda consider success largely in multiple ways but especially being financially stable reflected in owning and running and a good business, having a good job, having assets and property, also attaining an education and then

starting a family. In most cases success meant having multiple of these characteristics simultaneously. These considerations, however, varied by gender but also region. In aspects that reflect fulfilment of social roles and expectations of care for instance providing support to the family, young women outnumbered the men, while men dominated aspects to do with provision, protection and leadership. This means that gender division of labour informed by social and cultural norms still influence young people's perceptions of success. Success is thus a collective aspect rather than an individual achievement.

Young people understand success multi-dimensionally. The major aspects they considered included financial stability, having a good business, a good job, owning property, a good education and starting a family. The explanation of a successful life among young people in Uganda varies by age, gender, region, residence (whether rural or urban), marital status and level of education, among other factors. The graph below shows these different rankings.

Figure 2: Meaning of a successful life



Source: Field data, 2022

Overall, success is attributed to money and stable income. As indicated in the graph above, both male (58%) and female (57%) youth considered success as being financially stable and rich. Success is thus considered in financial terms. Consequently, young people are struggling to achieve financial independence no matter the process. One key informant emphasized that:

The dream of the youth here is getting rich. All they want is money. Even when they join politics or leadership, they consider that a road to wealth creation. They don't look at career, experience or job security. All they care about is money. ...whether they go to a witchdoctor and sacrifice, they want money. I would say all youth want to be rich and in a short time (Senior Community Development Officer).

Although money was central, some young people consider a successful life as one in which an individual has accumulated wealth and property. Property accumulation was emphasised by young men (44%), particularly in the form of productive assets and resources like land, animals, buildings, farms and owning a home. This confirms previous research indicating cultural and social norms that expect men to own property (Dimova, 2022). It was clear that youth were vigilant to sustain the money gained. The best way was to invest money in a property that appreciates and could be sustained for a longer time. Such ensures financial stability and prevents regression. One participant emphasized this:

You will curse life if you once have money and then you become “broke”. You will hate yourself. People will laugh at you. Even the friends you have will vanish. No one wants a poor friend because you become a burden **(Male FGD Sembabule district).**

Being “broke” in the Ugandan context reflects absolute poverty, a situation where one cannot even afford the basic requirements for a minimum standard of living. In this aspect, financial stability and sustenance of acquired wealth is connected to social networks and relationships. There is, thus, a connection between individual attributes and the collective.

Young people further considered success in terms of self-employment. This was more pronounced among the less educated young people. Young women were slightly more emphatic about creating a good business at 53% than young men at 50%, as demonstrated in Figure 3 above. Due to the scarcity of funds and capital, many youth dreamt of starting small businesses like retail shops, salons, restaurants, and tailoring stations. It was considered a sign of success if one achieved such a goal. Success in entrepreneurship was considered to avail freedom and independence of “being your own boss”.

Overall success for young women and men focused on financial stability and creating a good business. There were, however, variances when young men ranked a good job (46%) and owning property (44%), while young women prioritized collective benefit for instance providing support to the family (40%) and good education (34%).

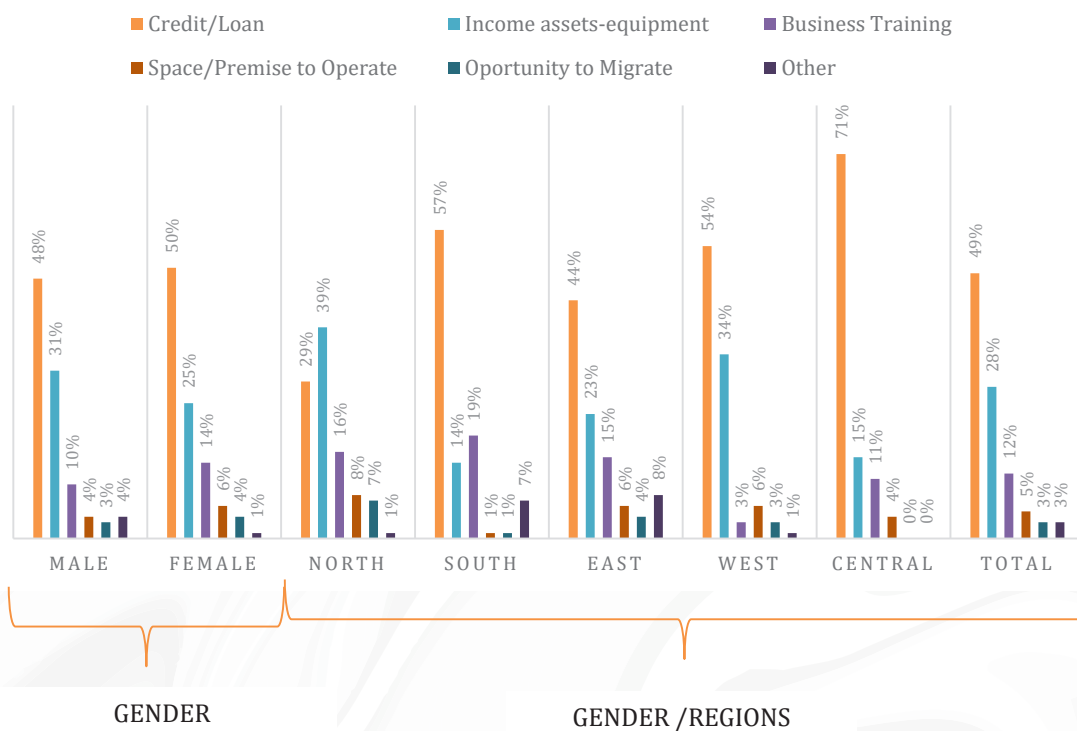
While it was very clear what success meant for

young women and men, there were requirements necessary to achieve success. The requirements were contextually different given the location/ region the youth were located, as well as gender and the varying levels of education. These were mainly focused on resources in the form of credit, capital assets and equipment. A more detailed explanation is presented in the following section.

Requirements for attaining success for young people

The graph below elaborates on what young people think is necessary to attain the desired success. It presents the requirements as represented by gender and region of the young people. To attain the desired success, young people identified specific support required regarding resources and services. As shown in Figure 4 below, the most ranked requirement/need is credit facilities (49%), followed by capital assets and equipment (28%), and then business training (12%).

Figure 3: Requirements for attaining success



Overall, both young women (50%) and men (48%) demonstrated a need for credit and loan services. Young men were more interested in income assets at 31% compared to young women at 25%.

Overall, there was less interest in migration, with the highest being 7% in the northern region. The qualitative interactions revealed further that young people in the northern region were interested in travelling to pursue an education in “good” schools. Qualitative data further revealed that travelling abroad is an aspiration for a few young people. Some young people believed they could not achieve their dreams in Uganda as they had “lost hope”; hence, leaving Uganda would facilitate attaining the desired future. The quantitative data reveals that males (3%) and females (4%) categorized travelling abroad as an opportunity to attain the desired future. This contradicts popular narratives of young African people going abroad for a better future (UNESCO, 2023). In Uganda, narratives of mistreatment and abuse amounting to some cases of human trafficking and death have been flooding media spaces, which has discouraged not only potential travellers but also parents and the general community. There is also preaching against unnecessary abroad job searchers by politicians and civil society organizations (Business and Human Rights Resource Center, 2022). A small percentage of those interested in going abroad were laying strategies and taking the necessary steps, including saving and acquiring travel documents and information. One female participant explained the progress she was making in this regard:

I have been selling second hand clothes and I was able to get a passport. As of now, I am only waiting to turn to the required age of twenty-two. I am still going to continue selling clothes as I earn and save some money. With my passport, I will travel and go work abroad. I believe things are better out there (Female FGD Serere district).

The desire to travel abroad, especially for some young women, confirms previous reports noting over 500 young women flying out of the country in search of employment (The Independent, 2021) amidst mistreatment and torture, especially in the Middle East (Namaganda & Nkirote, 2022).

Young people's desired future employment

Youth desired to be employed in a wide range of employment avenues. Their preferences were informed by a number of factors including good salary (33%), flexibility at work (32%), family support (31%), security (29%), opportunity to grow (21%), work-life balance (18%), time flexibility (17%), opportunity to learn (10%), good social image (8%), helping outside family (7%), respect for employees (5%), and opportunity to travel (4%). The graph below provides the factors broken down by gender.

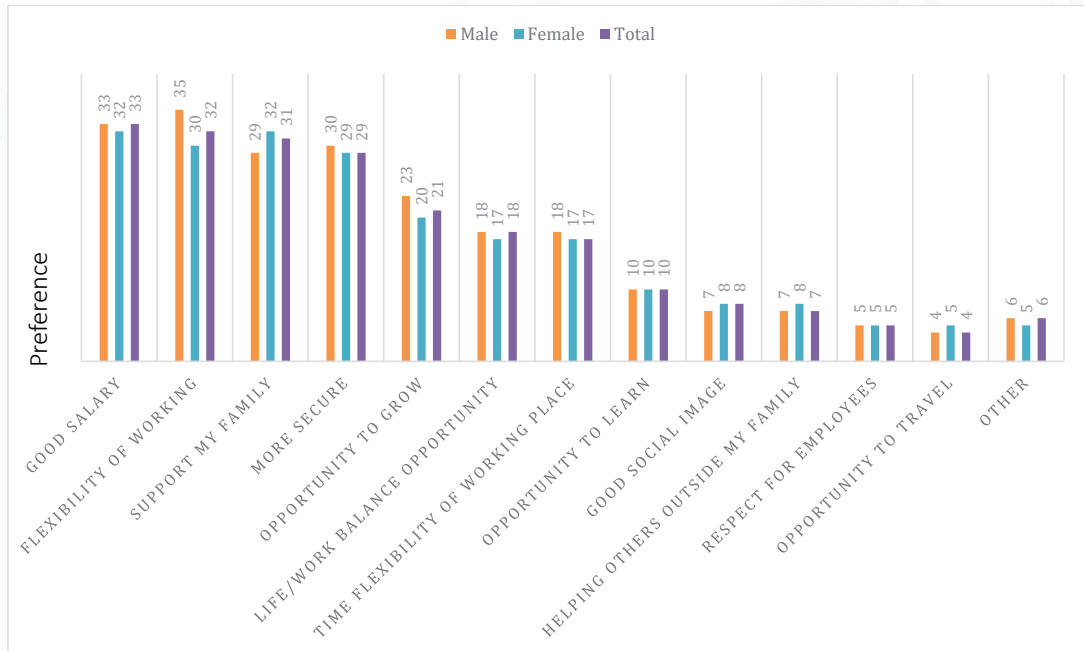


Figure 4: Factors influencing job preference by gender

Majority explained their choice based on a good salary. The understanding of good salary varied between urban and rural youth in terms of amount, but the intentions were related. A good salary is enough to meet the basic personal needs of youth and their families and facilitate community engagement. Community engagement involves being able to contribute to social causes like weddings and funerals, as well as spiritual community obligations like church contributions. Such were highly considered important in measuring individuals' commitment to the social common good.

Besides a good salary, young men (35%) emphasized flexibility at work as critical. Young women (32%), however, ranked family support second. The emphasis on family support for females is also reflected in qualitative data where young women valued marriage and family as critical to one's fulfillment in life, as well as indicators of success that

go beyond the individual to include community:

Everyone wants to marry; it is part of life. It is a sign of completeness and an achievement for women. It pleases the parents and you earn respect from the community. If I have to decide between a job and my marriage, I would give up the job. Even if one marriage fails, I will go into another (Female FGD Sembabule).

Other attributes that stood out were security, opportunity to grow, flexibility at work, and work-life balance. All these were integrated into the understanding of success as the nature of the job directly impacted the attainment of indicators of success, as discussed earlier. Despite young people's clarity on what success meant and how to attain such success, the study noted several hindrances presented in the following section.

Barriers to achieving a successful life

There are multiple barriers, including individual and institutional, as well as social and cultural barriers.

Social norms and values

Young women explained that their success is curtailed by several factors relating to gender, gender roles and social expectations. They fail to achieve anticipated success because many of them are stopped by their husbands from leaving home to go and work. Such restrictions cut young women off from their contacts and networks. Men (husbands) exercise their control over women (wives) in fulfilment of social expectations of men being household heads, and thus power centres on them. Women are expected to conform to men's decisions, or else it may sabotage their marriage. For women who manage to work, they explained an additional economic burden where males relegate all family responsibilities to the women. This limits the woman's savings that would help in buying and owning any property, such as land and animals. For example, a female participant recounts:

There are women in the community whose husbands refuse them to work. This limits you as a woman from attaining certain things you may dream to have like owning a plot of land since you have no money to purchase it. Then there are men who when they realize that the woman is working and making money, they remove themselves from the responsibility of taking care of the home and leave all the responsibility on the woman (Female FGD Kiboga)

Gender norms in most parts of Uganda dictate that men are household heads, own and control resources, and make important decisions, while women are submissive (Ninsiima et al., 2018). Norms further shape suitable work, roles, and responsibilities for men and women, limiting women's access, control, and voice against inequality (Namuggala & Oosterom, 2023). Sometimes, when young women get certain jobs, they are sexually harassed by their bosses, which affects their esteem and success. Literature has confirmed that workplace sexual harassment, to the disadvantage of women and girls, is rampant in Uganda, both in

the formal and informal economies (Ibid).

Gender norms further put overwhelming expectations and demands on young men. Young men regretted too much expectation from society (including spouses and in-laws), such as taking care of financial needs. Social expectations demand that men take full responsibility for all family needs if they are to be respected in society. In trying to affirm their identity as men, young men spend beyond their income, making saving impossible and failing to attain desired dreams.

Further norms promote communal cooperation and support, which has negatively impacted businesses. Study participants noted that many businesses are run on debt as customers pick commodities and then promise to pay later. However, many fail to pay on time, which draws businesses backwards. The majority of the youth get startup capital as loans from group savings. So, they must empty the business to pay loans if customers fail to pay on time. One female participant operating a retail shop explained:

When you are trying to push your business to succeed, there are people that may be frustrating it to fail. For example, some people will borrow things from your business and promise to pay in a short time which they don't do. If you refuse to give them things on credit next time, they speak ill about you, as in you are a bad person in the community and you are not cooperative (Female FGD Isingiro district).

This perspective underscores the significance of communal networks. However, while they offer benefits such as social security, attempting to maintain harmony with fellow members and projecting cooperativeness can sometimes lead to business failures. This challenge is exacerbated for young people who may struggle to refuse elders' goods on credit. Moreover, due to the societal respect accorded to old age, they may also struggle to demand payment assertively.

Conditioned support for youth

Many government parastatals and NGOs were giving capital in the form of loans to support youth during the pandemic. However, collateral in the form of property, land titles, and car titles was required. Yet, most youth do not own or cannot access such. That limited their access to and use

of the available opportunities. Besides the high interest rates, the conditions attached did not favour the youth:

BRAC gives us loans so we startup businesses or expand already existing businesses. Vision Fund also used to give loans to help expand their businesses. People in the community didn't like the interest rates they charged as they seemed very high. But youth specifically were systematically disqualified. Also, these organizations help those who already have something but not the youth in the community. Before you are given the loan, you present security like land to the organization (Male FGD Kiboga district).

Conditioned support is further complicated by inadequate mobilization among youth. The study uncovered that youth are not readily mobilized within their age groups; they often undermine each other based on educational attainment. There's a perception that the educated receive more advantages, fostering divisions. Consequently, some youth refrain from attending meetings or sensitization workshops, resulting in their self-exclusion from development programs.

The nature of work

Most youth were involved in informal employment, where they earned hand-to-mouth. It is very hard or impossible to achieve desired dreams if one spends more than they earn. During COVID-19, for instance, most youth used to do casual labour, which they earned and spent daily. This meant that if they did not work, their families would not get the necessities to survive. In such situations, individuals worry more about daily survival than the future. Informal sector jobs earn very little against the high cost of living, hindering youth aspirations and dreams. Young people's involvement in the informal sector re-asserts previous studies highlighting the sector's role in employment. For instance, the Economic Policy Research Center notes that the sector accounts for over 91% of non-farm employment in Uganda, with young people (those aged between 18 and 30) occupying 95% of those jobs (EPRC, 2023).

Further, the cost of agricultural produce during the pandemic was low because the big markets for agricultural produce, especially in the urban centres and abroad, were closed due to the lockdown.

Local food like bananas, potatoes, and cassava floated in the producing rural areas. Some youth started agro-related businesses, including restaurants, which turned out challenging. This, however, changed in the "post"-pandemic era as prices hiked, making business very difficult. One participant lamented.

So, us in the restaurant business are struggling because you buy produce expensively and sell the food cheaply but we do it because we have to keep clients. For example, we buy a kilo of rice at Ugsh 6,500 and a kilo of beans at Ugsh 5,800. There is barely any profit made from this. So, with such struggles when will an individual achieve or reach their target goal? (Female FGD Butambala).

Fluctuating unstable market prices make it risky for young people to invest in businesses and sustainably plan and invest to attain their aspirations. Recurrent losses affect financial capital in small businesses, resulting in the gradual collapse of the businesses. Poor climatic conditions worsen the structural and systemic challenges.

Climatic conditions

The poor climatic conditions have negatively affected young people, especially those in agriculture and agro-related enterprises. Climate changes have impacted rainfall patterns and seasons yet most farmers in Uganda rely entirely on nature for their production. One participant said:

The climate greatly affects us all together. It determines what quantity of yields come out from the farm. Be it beans or maize. And this helps determine the price. When the season is good, everyone yields more. Meaning, the price is down but when the season is unfavourable/bad this means low yields hence the price being high. As a farmer, you cannot plan ahead but have to wait and see how the season goes (Male FGD Kanungu district)

Despite agriculture contributing over 40% of Uganda's GDP and employing over 80% of the labour force, it is vulnerable to drought. Farmers' access to relevant information is also limited. This has greatly affected income, food security, and the ecosystem (UNCC, 2023).

Corruption and embezzlement

Another limitation affecting both male and female youth is the challenge of land ownership. Many youth strive to work hard and acquire land. However, when influential individuals, including wealthy individuals and government officials, express interest in a particular piece of land, corruption often comes into play. The land is then taken by these “big” people, despite legal ownership by the young people. Even if cases are taken to court, the “big” people often receive favourable treatment, resulting in losing their land.

Pandemics: COVID-19 and Ebola

Young people expressed the negative impact resulting from pandemics especially COVID-19 which affected the whole world but also others including Ebola which hit Uganda. COVID-19 had serious impacts for education since Uganda’s educational institutions were closed for a period of two years. Even when innovative ways of attaining education including online classes (E-Learning) were initiated, it worsened the gap between the rural and urban learners. Youth noted that those in rural settings struggled with poor internet connections, high costs for data and also lack of devices including computers and smartphones which were needed for the smooth running of the lessons. As COVID-19 subsided, Uganda was hit with Ebola. Government measures to curb the diseases involved restrictions on movements and networking which affected young people’s quest for a successful life further. One of the participants in an FGD had this to say;

I was at the university at the time of the pandemic (COVID-19) and we were sent back home. University was closed under the national lockdown but later online classes were introduced but we struggled. For us who were in the village, the connection was very bad we could hardly follow the discussion, also power (electricity) was always off, some students didn’t even have smartphones or computers to use. When the university opened, we had to sit for exams... it was terrible. (Male FGD, Northern Uganda).

A female participant also explains;

During COVID, students lost interest for school. It seemed like schooling was no longer the key to success. Many girls got married due to being idle, others got pregnant in the search for survival as parents could no longer provide for the needs- even small things including pads. The poverty levels were really high.

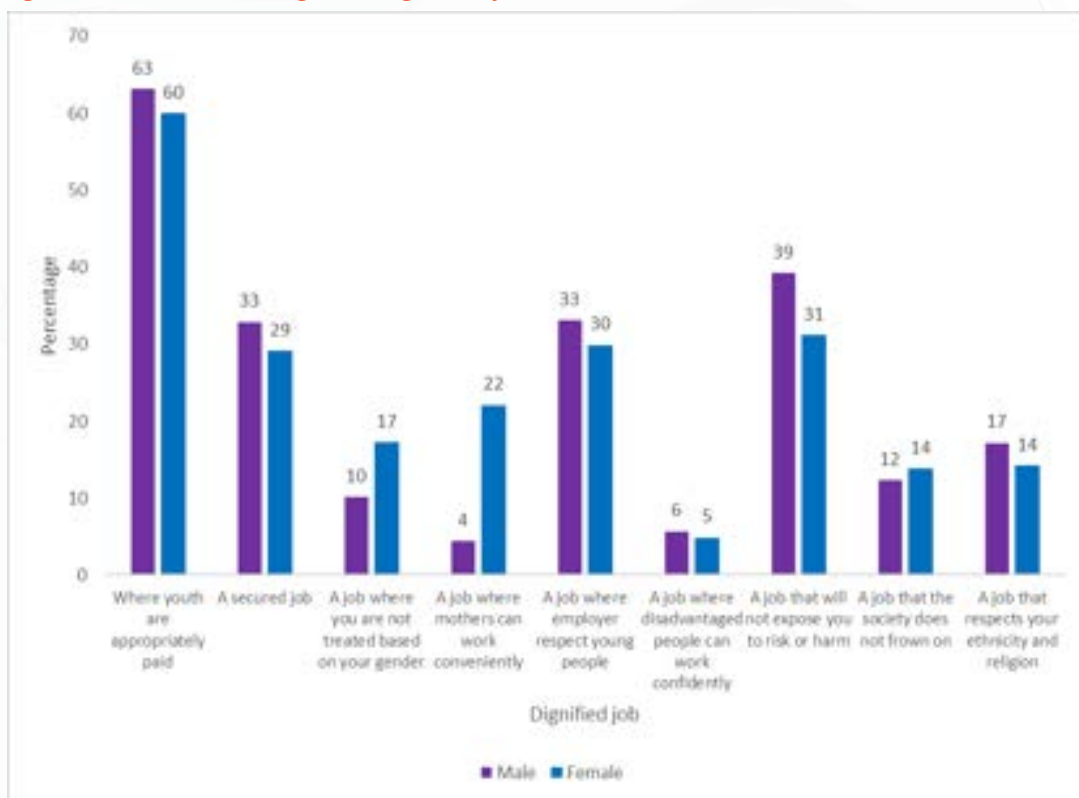
Youth Perspective on Dignified and Fulfilling Work

According to the young people in Uganda, dignified work is different from fulfilling work. Dignified work looks at respect accorded to employees without discrimination among jobs, while fulfilling work is where young people apply their talents and knowledge as they meet their financial and personal needs. In Uganda, many youth don’t separate dignified and fulfilling work. Although it varied by region and location (urban and rural), study participants explained that dignifying work should be able to earn one’s survival. Society, particularly the youth, often prioritizes wealth above values such as integrity, collective responsibility, and care. In pursuit of money, young people may compromise on these principles. The perception exists that any job becomes dignified as long as it brings financial gain, overshadowing the importance of integrity and communal well-being:

According to me there is no clear cut because recently we thought office jobs were okay, but the youth of today prefer something that gives them a living, so whichever work they do as long as they take something home that’s dignifying employment. Many have opted for that, somebody gets himself into a deal of getting money, no matter the kind of deal as long as they are going to get money (DCDO Amuru).

The understanding of dignified work varied by gender. Both men and women greatly valued decent work in terms of appropriate pay, employer-employee respect, peace of mind at work, gender equality and sensitivity at work, non-stigmatized work and a job that respects social and cultural norms, including religion and ethnicity.

Figure 5: Understanding of a dignified job



From the graph above, it can be concluded that young people do not prioritize social inclusion as the key to dignified work. Only 6% of males and 5% of females acknowledged jobs where disadvantaged people are considered. These percentages are low because the participants did not pay attention to how disadvantaged they were but rather were persistent and resilient towards achieving their dreams. Only 4% of males considered work that allows mothers to work because the male participants did not seem to understand the challenges mothers face in working as they look after their children. Some breastfeeding mothers have to move with their children, for example, those who go very early to the markets to trade, which is very risky to the baby but also disturbing to the mother.

A consensus is that dignified and fulfilling work is where young people are appropriately paid. There is no significant variation between females (60%) and males (63%); this is driven by the fact that both male and female youth consider money the main reason for working. According to the young people in Uganda, dignified work is majorly for the educated, such as medical doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, lecturers and those in

government offices such as the Chief Administrative Officers (CAO), Resident District Commissioner (RDC), Community Development Officers (CDO), District Community Development Officers (DCDO) among others and NGO jobs. Study findings emphasised that such jobs are for a few lucky ones because the system is so corrupt in that for one to secure a dignified job, they must have someone they technically know from the government or from the organizations in which he/she applies for the job thus leaving many educated youth jobless. Because of that, many educated unemployed youth opt for other fulfilling jobs such as sex work for females night and day robbery for males for them to earn a living.

In addition to pay, dignified work is expected to have different benefits such as medical insurance, housing, car, etc. Many educated youth aspire to get these benefits; however, the Ugandan system does not favour all employees. The benefits are only enjoyed by a few top government officials such as ministers, members of parliament, district leaders, and commissioners, but a few big private institutions such as banks, communication houses (MTN), and NGOs. Those positions are mainly oc-

cupied by older people, which limits the chances of young people getting dignified work. The desire to have the mentioned benefits pushes youth into undignified but fulfilling work such as charcoal burning, night watchman for the males and selling food and bar attendants for female youth. It is considered fulfilling as they earn income regularly and at times in lump sum, for instance, from charcoal burning.

Dignified and fulfilling work includes having a secure job. More males than females (33% males and 29% females) supported having a permanent job because society sees them as the family's breadwinners and, therefore, must earn to provide. Security in this regard means being safe and not fearing losing a job. Most of the government employees are assured of permanent and pensionable work status. During the pandemic, government employees were assured of higher salaries than those working in the private sector. This inspired many young people to admire government jobs. However, youth who are afraid of losing their jobs often think of initiating their own jobs to be secure. Young men love to do jobs like welding, electric wiring, and carpentry, and young women love to do jobs like hairdressing and starting small restaurants to have comfort, autonomy in decision making and security at work.

In Uganda, male and female youth attach almost the same value towards respect in relation to work. (33% male, 30% female). Dignified workers are expected to have respect from employers. For example, maternity leave should be granted to females, monthly leave should be given to workers, and sick leave should be granted when asked for by the employee. Respect is also manifested in the way employers communicate with the employees. Youth also yearn for jobs that attract respect in society and public spaces, such as churches, mosques, and traditional ceremonies. Because of the desire to fulfill their financial obligations, some young people have given up on respect from dignified work and resorted to fulfilling jobs. For example, many male youth have been attracted to boda boda riding because they are determined to work hard, save money, organize themselves in developmental groups, and be dynamic in all situations. However, they have a weird character, i.e., they are vulgar, dirty, they drink alcohol a lot during working hours, use drugs which makes them reckless and smell bad.

Uganda's youth viewed dignified work as hav-

ing a job that would not expose them to risk (39% male, 31% female). Although the quantitative data shows that more male youth fear risks than female youth, the qualitative data shows that male youth are ready to take any risks as long as they earn money. Female youth fear risks, so they avoid jobs like working night shifts because women are at risk of being raped, and it's not safe for breastfeeding mothers and their babies, loading trucks with foodstuff at the gardens and offloading at the market centres because this would cause deep pain in the chests, pregnant women working in factories which would affect their unborn babies and working in bars, lodges which would sometimes lead to being sexually abused by male customers. Moreover, the male youth do jobs with risk, like working in factories, which makes them get direct cuts from machines, fishing where boats can collapse in the lakes, digging pit latrines and quarrying stones which may collapse and burry them alive etc. Despite the above risks, many youth do these jobs for survival, and they consider them fulfilling because they meet their financial needs.

Accessibility of the workplace. This meant that if it required spending much time on the way to work, it resulted in being late and being blamed and penalized by the employer, which was not dignified work. In Uganda, traffic jams, especially in the city centre, are a problem that leads to delays on the way. Youth see this as undignified if it requires spending money for transport to work since it reduces their take home at the end of the day. This is why many of them prefer to work from home or within nearby places.

Many youth embraced the agriculture/farming value chain to survive. They acquired food through farming but also sold agricultural produce to earn income. During the COVID-19 lockdown, food and agricultural produce sellers were considered "essential workers", so they continued working even during lockdown to avoid starvation. They respected agriculture as a dignifying job, which was not the case before. One participant explains below.

Before COVID-19, I was in town, and you could not tell me to go back to the village to dig. But, when it emerged, I returned home to the village and I am digging. I do not regret it at all. I respect farmers and I find that farming is a dignifying job. At least if you don't sell, you cannot sleep hungry (Male FGD Kanungu).

Figure 6: Youth involvement in agriculture (source: Picture taken during fieldwork)



Other participants, especially the women, understood dignified and fulfilling jobs as those that enable one to have basic needs for their dependents and a job that would allow them to take care of household responsibilities as mothers and wives, hence agriculture. Family support regarding practical needs like food is socio-culturally defined as a woman's role. The failure to fulfil such social expectations thus questions one's position in society. Agriculture was thus considered a dignified and fulfilling job for putting food on the table. One would feel unfulfilled if they could not meet the basic needs of dependents like children.

When you have food to feed the children most of your problems have been solved. Apart from that of course there are some small things like salt, sugar that you cannot dig and have to buy. Of which things like sugar we could do away without them but salt you have to find a way of getting that 1000shs to get salt for example work in rich people's farms to get small money
(Female FGD, Isingiro).

Overall, the understanding of fulfilling work revolved around work that gives satisfaction to individuals involved (meeting basic needs like food and shelter) but also created a stronger sense of belonging and identity with the larger community. Such was demonstrated through earned respect and appreciation from the community, which is termed as being a valued community member. Shared societal beliefs and perceptions largely shaped such individual desires and choices.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Young People's Aspirations

Literature on the impact of COVID-19 on young women and men's aspirations in Uganda reveals that the pandemic posed considerable risks in education, employment, mental and general health, and disposable income (OECD, 2020; Ssempebwa et al., 2022). The "new normal" suddenly and abruptly redefined the education aspirations of millions of girls (Norgah, 2020) and created serious mental well-being concerns (Ryder, 2020). The pandemic further changed youth conceptualization of dignified work due to heightened barriers to preparing for and accessing decent employment opportunities (FAO, 2020). The emergent gender issues, including gender-based violence, early marriages, and teenage pregnancies, threatened to reverse gains made in gender equality and social inclusion (Plan International, 2020).

COVID-19 has reshaped how societies conceptualise youthhood. The COVID-19 era fast-tracked the transition from childhood to youthhood. The description of youth as young people who are independent and able to care for themselves was more common during COVID-19. In Uganda, many young people were out of school for over two years due to the school closure and lockdown that the government took as a measure to curb the spread of the COVID-19 disease. Consequently, the study revealed that as a means of survival, several young women got married at a very early age, below the age of eighteen and became young parents. Marriage comes along with responsibility

and social expectations. Therefore, married young people had to suit the social demands, emphasising youthhood as a time to demonstrate independence, responsibility, and resilience. Due to COVID-19, more younger people have come to be considered youth despite their lower numeric age:

COVID-19 also pushed away many youth from school and getting married. Others got pregnant because they were idle at home for 2 years and not under close care. Many parents gave up on those who got pregnant. They saw it as a relief from paying school fees (CDO, Isingiro district).

Besides dropping out of school, some young people's maturity was influenced by the loss of their parents and guardians during the pandemic. They took over responsibilities relating to provision and protection that previously were under the care of their parents. Such newly adopted responsibilities extended to caring for siblings, the sick and elderly relatives. That led many young people below 18 years of age to graduate to adulthood responsibilities.

Before the pandemic outbreak, young people were associated with smartness, comfort, love for white-collar jobs, pleasure and enjoyment. This was expressed in different ways, including visiting bars, discos/nightclubs, gambling and sports betting, going out to beaches, cinema halls and watching football games. However, with the influence of COVID-19, this changed. Businesses in towns and urban centres closed. Several young people returned to rural areas and ancestral homes where they could access basic needs, including accommodation and food from their extended families, at no cost. After some time while in the village, the initially smart youth got involved in the 'dirty village jobs' like bricklaying, assisting in construction, digging pit latrines, and so forth. For male youth and prostitution for female youth. Both male and female youth also participated in farming and animal husbandry for survival.

Returning to their home villages also facilitated family reunions. This provided older members of the families with an opportunity to impart cultural norms and values to the younger generation, including traditional dressing, respect for and interaction with elders in the community, as well as insights into agricultural practices and the supply chain dynamics of supermarket purchases. This process helped bridge the generational gap that

had arisen between young people and elders in the community due to rural-urban migration.

With urban-rural migration, young people re-evaluated and got involved in alternative ways of survival. Youth became creative and ventured into new businesses that were becoming lucrative at the time. Those included making liquid soap, making and selling masks, and hawking along the roads. With the little they earned from these innovative jobs, young people learnt to minimize their expenditure and save. This was enhanced by the fact that they realized they could survive without visiting bars, going to watch football games and other luxuries. Youth developed a value for a saving culture after learning that they needed to have some money set aside to survive in times without jobs.

Opportunities for young people because of COVID-19

The COVID-19 experience changed young people's perceptions, actions and attitudes about agriculture. Their focus and attention got more on how profitably they can engage in it. Communities started appreciating young people as a potentially productive and resourceful group in agriculture, known to be done by elderly people. With a profit-minded entry into agriculture, many youth joined with innovative and modernized ways of doing it. Consequently, there was increased agricultural productivity as energetic and strong youth were now willing to participate actively. One female participant explained that:

I now value farming, I work hard to achieve success from farming, so when I wake up, I cook food for the family and after this I go to the garden and dig, then later in the evening, I sell food to the people in the trading centre (Female FGD Butambala district).

As the young woman above elaborates, farming became a new anchor in her life. She could use her garden to feed the family and earn income from selling food in the trading centre in the evenings. With a full-day scheduled engagement, such a person has no time to be idle as this would make her indulge in cheap, unproductive talks, peer influence into prostitution and other undignifying work.

Further, due to COVID-19, the understanding of youth as individualistic was shifted. The ma-

majority of youth disregarded individualism and embraced more collective ways of survival through group formation. Through these groups, the government would support them by providing skills like tailoring, hairdressing, liquid soap making, and mask making, among others. In these groups, they learnt different ideas, such as new survival coping mechanisms and encouraged each other to survive through challenging times. The young people accumulated capital in the form of loans from their small saving groups to start small-scale businesses such as saloons, small restaurants and mobile money businesses mostly for the female youth. Male youth, on the other hand, were involved in mobile shops, using bicycles and motorcycles to provide home necessities since all individuals had no free movement. One key informant affirmed this:

During the pandemic, youth decided to work together as groups rather than individuals. This was because they realized working in teams would be more productive and bring better results than doing things individually. Groups also provided the social support each one needed due to the tension created by the pandemic (Local Council Leader Isingiro district).

The gender division of labour, including roles and responsibilities among youth, underwent a transformation during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, in many regions of Uganda, married young women were typically expected to remain at home and focus on domestic work. Male counterparts/husbands would go to the public spaces for paid work. Males were charged with providing the family with basic needs, including food, school fees, rent, and clothes. As the economy crippled due to the pandemic and control mechanisms implemented by the government, including lockdown and curfew directives, male youth lost their sources of income. In order to earn a living, women could easily find simple jobs like washing clothes (laundry services) for people around the village, and hawking/working as vendors for clothes and food. Males, on the other hand, feminised such jobs and considered it demeaning for them as males to do such jobs.

Consequently, the wives started to provide for the family's basic needs since they earned an income that men did not. This shift in economic dynamics led to changes in power relations and

decision-making within the household. One male participant explains:

Before COVID-19, girls and women used to sit home waiting for that man (the breadwinner) to bring everything home. But during COVID-19 lockdowns when men were also confined at home, women opened to doing all sorts of jobs to support their families. Men had to now discuss with the women who were now the providers (Male FGD Kiboga district).

There was a significant shift in the strict gender division of labour, and gender relations as well. Although the gender division of labour had started changing before, changes during COVID-19 were more significant and noticeable. In search of survival, women assume jobs previously defined by men. One male participant said that, *given our times, even women do men's jobs like conductors in taxi parks. These days, women have become 'men'*. Prior to COVID-19, young women were defined by stereotypical constructions that position women as soft and weak. Such narratives, however, changed as women demonstrated active involvement in "men's" roles. Men, on the other hand, also got incorporated into roles previously attributed to women. One male participant from the Kiboga district noted that *these days, men also cook and sell food like women, and you have to be kind, clean and smile for the customers otherwise you don't sell*. Such socio-cultural shifts have been sustained even during the post-covid-19 phase. This has enabled societal appreciation and value for women's roles and their contribution to economic and social development. Young people have become more innovative and accommodative to diversity and change. They focus more on the benefits and less on the social expectations.

In addition to social shifts, COVID-19 brought about technological advancements that benefited young people. Urban youth, in particular, embraced new technologies, gaining skills and starting online businesses through platforms like networking, TikTok, X, and Facebook. With online studying becoming prevalent through platforms such as Zoom and Google Class, education became more inclusive and accommodating. However, challenges persisted, including poor connectivity, lack of skills, and limited access to necessary gadgets in remote areas of Uganda.

Amid the pandemic, some youth, both male

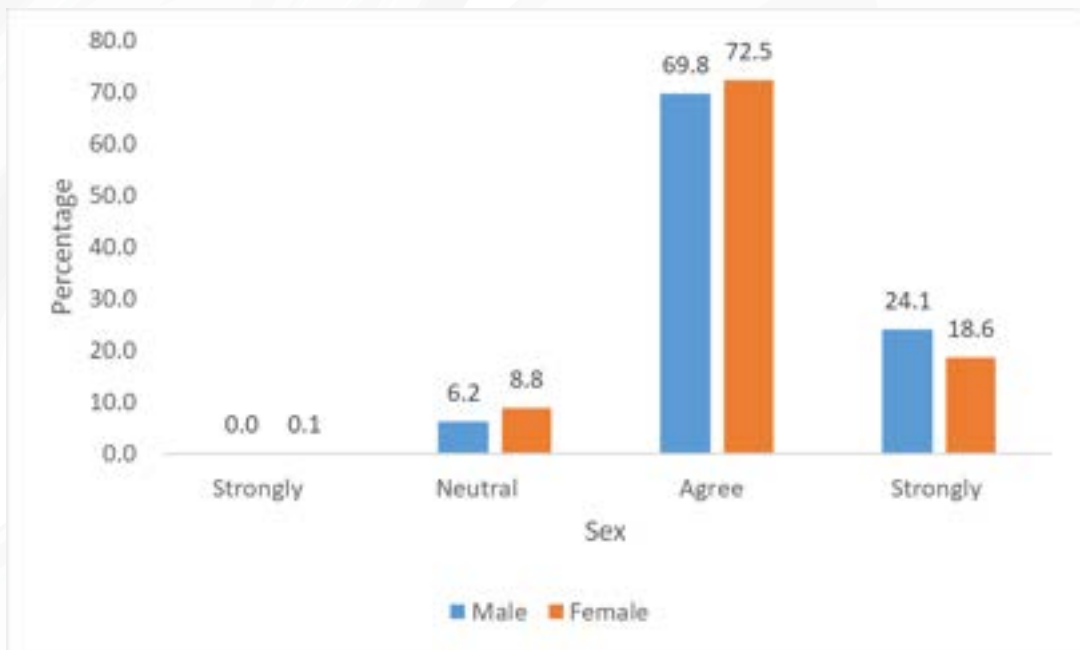
and female, found opportunities in law enforcement. They were recruited as police constables and local defence unit personnel (LDUs) to enforce COVID-19 standard operating procedures. Subsequently, some of them joined the Uganda Peoples' Defense Force (UPDF), securing government salaries.

Domestic violence became increasingly prevalent in households during the COVID-19 pandemic. With partners spending prolonged periods together at home, issues that were previously overlooked came to the forefront, leading to insults, abuse, and fights. This cycle of violence often extends from parents to children, with some even choosing to leave home. Consequently, there was a notable increase in school dropout rates post-COVID-19.

Youth resilience and adaptability strategies

Even though the youth aspirations, such as education and entrepreneurship, were greatly affected by the pandemic, these young people did not give up. Asked whether they were resilient, most young women and men agreed, identifying as committed, having a positive self-image, relationship and social support, and positive thinking. The graph below shows attitudes towards youth resilience by gender. Males (69.8%) and females 72.5% agreed that young people were resilient, while none disagreed with the statement.

Figure 7: Attitudes towards youth resilience



To delve into young people's perceptions regarding resilience, the report elaborates on coping mechanisms and strategies identified through focus group discussions with youth. These are categorized into economic, social, and politically influenced strategies.

Economic Strategies

Young people developed the spirit of working in teams. They formed groups to enable them to access loans to start up small businesses and small farming. In groups, youth could get money from government programmes that were brought close to the district level, as well as NGOs like BRAC and World Vision in different regions of the country. In areas where government money could not be accessed, they accumulated capital from their small savings and supported each other mainly in agriculture because it was close to many acceptable activities according to the COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) and food production was essential at the time. Many ventured mainly into joint agricultural

businesses among the males and females. Others in their small saving groups got involved in small-scale businesses like bricklaying for the males and weaving mats and baskets, making liquid soap and masks for the females. This was done to utilize the power of numbers and accomplish a task fast to earn money. They confessed:

These days we work as a group and there are different groups in the community for both the males and females. We have a savings group here. We have been able to save some money however little it may be. With these groups, we have been able to accumulate capital and do some farming
(Male FGD Kiboga).

In addition to creating working and saving groups, young people adopted individual survival mechanisms. Young men in rural areas survived brick making and laying, animal rearing specifically in the western and southern region, boda boda riding, working on construction sites, loading agricultural produce and hired labour on farms, fishing and charcoal burning. On the other hand, young women were involved in small-scale farming, hired labour, plaiting hair in people's households, and selling agricultural produce along the roads and in markets. Overall, in the urban areas, young people joined the informal sector, including boda boda riding, weighing metal scrap, chapati making, working at fuel stations, selling masks by the roadside, mechanics and carpentry. Women in urban areas mentioned sex work, selling of charcoal, coaching pupils in people's homes, making face masks, washing clothes for neighbours, and house help labour.

Youth further started online businesses on twitter, Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. These were free of government taxation so youth made some profits. However, it required skills and technological advancement. Skills included communication and customer care skills, as well as online marketing skills and strategies, which many youth lacked; therefore, it took them time to learn and adopt. Those still in school embraced online classes via Zoom and Google Meet platforms. However, in rural areas, the poor network affects online classes.

Young people became more creative and innovative. For instance, they opened "mobile shops" to deliver essential requirements to their customers' homes, making liquid soap, sanitisers, masks,

and plastics. Many male youth have picked up such mobile shops due to the advantages they come with, including no rental fees required, no licences paid, and no utility bills. Yet, it supports networking as they meet new clients daily. So young people with limited capital can easily start such small businesses.

Cutting down expenditure, especially on luxuries like fancy clothes and shoes, going to bars, and wasteful outings, was also a strategy adopted by young people. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most youth were self-employed and daily earners; this made them feel they had a lot of money to spend extravagantly. With the coming of COVID-19, all businesses closed, which made them realise the need to only spend on basic needs like food, clothing, housing, and healthcare in order to have a surplus they can save for future use in case one cannot earn daily.

Young women and men sold their property and belongings to survive. They did this to get money for three major reasons: basic needs (accommodation, food), medical bills for those who were sick with COVID-19 or had patients suffering from COVID-19, and capital to start/restart businesses. The belongings the youth sold included land, animals (such as pigs, cows, goats), boda bodas, television sets, radios, bicycles, sewing machines, hair dryers, and personal belongings like clothes, shoes, jewellery, and mobile phones.

Social Strategies

For many young women, marriage¹ was seen as a sustainable survival strategy. It was difficult for them to get basic needs, including sanitary towels, undergarments, and hair maintenance. These forced many young women to look at men as their source of survival. Due to the financial constraints, parents got overwhelmed with responsibilities, which led to gender-based violence, making homes less habitable for children. The study discovered that men not used to staying at home became rude and rough towards their wives and children.

Consequently, many young women ran away from their parents' homes and found refuge in the men's houses, hence marriage. Some parents were forced to marry their daughters off in order to get relief from parental responsibilities. This resonates with earlier findings by UNICEF (2022),

¹ Marriage in this context means to someone moving in and living under the same room with the partner and not necessarily the standardised official understanding of marriage.

emphasising how COVID-19 had heightened risk factors for early marriages due to food and economic insecurities.

The role of social networks during COVID-19 was important. Many young people mentioned having survived the challenges of the pandemic by seeking refuge from their relatives and friends. Many youth in the urban centres got stranded and could no longer afford the daily expenditure. They returned to their ancestral homes where they could get free food, housing and comfort from their relatives. In extreme cases, some married male youth sent their wives and children back to their parents' homes since they could not take care of them. One participant narrates;

As an individual, I reached a level when I could not handle any more and sent my wife back to her parent's home because even at that time, we were renting two different places, and yet we were both not working, so I decided to sell off some of the things we were using at the time to send her back to her parents where she remained until the lockdown was partially lifted and she came back but after we had nearly sold everything we had before COVID-19. (Male FGD Isingiro district).

Local leaders in the central region identified vulnerable single and expectant mothers, who were then assisted by NGOs such as BAYLOR and MILD MAY. These organizations provided them with essential daily needs such as soap, food, clothing, diapers for their children, and shelter. Additionally, they received counselling, support, and advice to help them cope with their situation and ensure safe delivery. Furthermore, they were empowered to return to school and pursue their dreams and aspirations.

Politically motivated strategies

Many youth found help from donations from political leaders and the government. The study revealed that politicians in all regions of the country gave their voters free food (maize flour, beans, rice and powdered milk in some areas for breastfeeding mothers). Other necessities like soap, masks, and sanitiser were also provided to promote hygiene. In addition to the regional politicians, the country's prime minister, through her office, donated 100,000shs to each vulnerable person identified by the local leaders, and many unemployed

and disabled youth benefited from the program.

During the pandemic, youth on government payroll continued to receive salaries despite not working, providing them with an opportunity to explore new business ventures. Many started side-income businesses like mobile money kiosks, small restaurants, and salons alongside their government jobs. However, some young people resorted to illegal coping mechanisms, leading to moral decay among them.

To survive, many young men turned to theft and robbery, often stealing animals like goats and cows since highway robbery was limited due to curfew restrictions. Additionally, frustrations led some to engage in drug abuse, which in turn contributed to incidents of rape and defilement, resulting in imprisonment for many. Young women, on the other hand, were involved in activities such as prostitution as a means of coping with economic hardships.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the aspirations, adaptability, and resilience strategies of young women and men in Uganda. COVID-19 significantly impacted the youth negatively, leading to disrupted schooling, livelihoods, early and sometimes forced marriages, and teenage parenting. However, there were unexpected positive outcomes such as the adoption of ICT for education and income generation through online businesses, a shift in attitudes towards agriculture, and increased innovativeness among the youth.

Youth in Uganda have embraced modern technology, opening new opportunities. Technology is inclusive and can mitigate discrimination based on gender, disability, location, and education level. It can also integrate local and indigenous knowledge. However, technological access and use are hindered by socio-cultural norms, particularly concerning women and girls' possession of gadgets, as well as spatial disparities in electricity distribution and internet connectivity.

Generational differences in perceptions of youthhood exist, with older generations often viewing young people as lazy and irresponsible, while youth see themselves as active contributors to society. This gap impedes intergenerational collaboration and mentorship, emphasizing the importance of platforms for dialogue on youth issues.

There is a disconnect between young peoples' aspirations and the programs targeting them, leading to negative perceptions of government programs and self-exclusion from opportunities. This has resulted in youth engagement in risky behaviours like drug use and prostitution. Mentorship emerged as a crucial need for young people to develop sustainable survival skills within their local contexts.

Social networks play a crucial role in employment attainment in Uganda, with employability often linked to social capital, even in government employment. Recruitment procedures, including interviews, are often formality, with social networks influencing the hiring process. Thus, youth are keen to build strong networks to access opportunities and valuable knowledge.

This study concludes that young people represent a vital force for Uganda's development agenda, demonstrating resilience and innovation amidst challenges. It is imperative for government,

development partners, civil society, and cultural leaders to prioritize youth concerns and provide them with platforms for meaningful engagement. Giving young people a voice is crucial for fostering sustainable change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

MCF's for programmatic and strategic action

1. MCF programming should offer need-based services that effectively address youth aspirations as a heterogeneous group with diverse development interests and needs.
 - Those aspiring for education can access scholarships for formal or vocational skilling programs that acknowledge the social context and expected behaviours to limit resistance from local communities.
 - Those interested in entrepreneurship can be provided with low-interest or start-up capital loans, as well as support in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, financial management, and strategic marketing.
 - Young people inclined towards agriculture can receive support tailored to their interests, such as loans for land rental, access to improved climate-friendly/smart agricultural seeds and inputs, and assistance with risk assessment and post-harvest handling.
2. Existing youth saving groups and SACCOs in various regions have demonstrated their potential in addressing the challenges faced by youth. They should be supported to expand their services and replicate them in areas where they are lacking but necessary. These initiatives should establish linkages with government-led youth support programs and formalize connections with civil society and private sector stakeholders.
3. MCF should offer regional-based programming for youth in Uganda, adopting an integrated development approach. This should be implemented through multiple youth-friendly platforms that cater to their needs, aspirations, and socio-economic status/vulnerabilities. It should also facilitate local, regional, and inter-regional peer connections based on individual and/or group aspirations.
4. Additionally, MCF should support initiatives that promote digitalization in youth programming, including youth digital access, proficiency, and uptake/usage. This should

encompass various sectors such as education, entrepreneurship, agriculture, and access to other social services from both government and private sectors.

Government of Uganda

- The government of Uganda should adopt holistic approaches that involve the inclusivity of young people at various levels of programming, including situational analysis, program development, implementation planning, rollout, monitoring, evaluation, and learning management and documentation. This will ensure sustained awareness among young people about available programs.
- Government should strengthen collaboration and linkages between public and private, local and regional vocational institutes, and its BTNET and Work Pass basement programs to promote skilling and innovation.
- Comprehensive development and review of the education curriculum to align with contemporary labour challenges and market demands, and keep pace with global advancements in technology and environmental adaptability.
- Implementation of laws and policies on harmful social and cultural practices for instance early and forced marriages need to be reinforced. Government should forge sustainable collaborations with feminist and gender equality-focused NGOs, religious and cultural leaders to promote attitudinal change and implement existing legal approaches.

Research and Advocacy

- More research is still needed on youth livelihoods, resilience, and survival, as well as aspirations, and how these impact development at individual, communal, and national levels. Policies and programs should be based on evidence that prioritizes the voices and experiences of young people.
- There is a need to have research findings validated and disseminated with the key study participants (young people) to ensure a true representation of their lived realities and avoid distortion and mis-

representation. Other key stakeholders including the policy makers and opinion bearers should also be provided with a platform to engage with the young people to understand their various standpoints and opinions for sustainable development.

- Young people should directly be involved in advocating for their rights, and participate in leadership that involves youth-specific programming. Specific programs should have requirements that demand working with youth as active leaders to inform decision-making, planning and accountability.

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