



NGYouthSDGs
Network of Youth For Sustainable Initiative



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BEYOND AWARENESS

Youth Participatory Evidence on Work Experiences, Rights Violations, and Barriers to Decent Work in Nigeria



NGYouthSDGs

Growth Metrics 2024



► PREFACE

When we set out to conduct this study, one question guided us: what happens when we stop talking about young people and start listening to them?

Nigeria has no shortage of data on youth unemployment. We have statistics on labour force participation, policy documents outlining ambitious employment targets, and programme reports detailing interventions delivered across the country. What we have far less of is evidence grounded in the voices of young people themselves, evidence that reflects not just whether they are employed, but how they experience work; not just whether laws exist to protect them, but whether those laws mean anything in their daily reality; not just what skills they have, but what they feel they still need to thrive.

The Beyond Awareness: Youth Participatory Evidence on Work Experiences Rights Violations and Barriers to Decent Work in Nigeria study, is our attempt to close part of that gap. Between November and December 2025, the Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative (NGYouthSDGs), in partnership with UNIFOR, engaged 2,149 young people across all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory in a national participatory survey. We spoke with youth in urban centres, rural communities, and peri-urban settlements. We made intentional space for the voices of young persons with disabilities, who made up 16.3% of our respondents. We designed the research so that young people were not simply subjects of study but partners in shaping how the story would be told.

What emerged is a picture that is at once sobering and instructive. Awareness of workplace rights, we learned, does not automatically translate into protection. Informal work dominates the youth employment landscape, bringing with it exposure to unpaid wages, unsafe conditions, and limited recourse when things go wrong. Trust in government policy remains low. Yet alongside these findings sits something more hopeful: a clear, consistent demand from young people for practical skills, accessible information, and a genuine seat at the table when decisions about their working lives are being made.

This report is therefore not a conclusion but an invitation. It is an invitation to government and policymakers to move from policy articulation to meaningful enforcement. It is an invitation to employers to build workplaces that protect rather than exploit young workers. It is an invitation to unions, development partners, and fellow civil society organisations to join us in the work of making decent work a lived reality, not an aspiration. And it is an invitation to young people themselves to see this evidence as your own, and to use it.

We are grateful to UNIFOR for its partnership, to the 2,149 young people who trusted us with their experiences, and to the enumerators and the NGYouthSDGs research team who carried this work forward with rigour and care. The findings belong to all of us. The responsibility to act on them does, too.

Joshua Alade

Executive Director

Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative (NGYouthSDGs)

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► EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a youth-led, evidence-based perspective on young people's experiences of work and access to decent employment in Nigeria. It captures how youth understand workplace rights, the conditions under which they work, the skills they need to thrive, and the barriers that limit their access to safe, fair, and productive employment. Using a participatory approach, the study centres young people's voices to inform policy, advocacy, and programme interventions on decent work.

The research was led by the Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative (NGYouthSDGs) in partnership with UNIFOR between November and December 2025. A national youth participatory survey was conducted with 2,149 respondents across all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, covering urban, rural, and peri-urban communities across all six geopolitical zones, with near-equal gender balance. The study also intentionally included persons with disabilities (351 respondents, representing 16.3% of the sample), ensuring broad national and demographic representation of youth aged 15–35. While the NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) classification was not applied explicitly, respondents not in employment, education, or training are represented across the employment status categories and collectively approximate 40.8% of the sample, consistent with the broader NEET challenge documented across Africa, where over 72 million youth are NEET (ILO, 2023).

Findings show that while 57.5% of respondents are aware that workplace rights exist, this awareness is mostly general. Only 40.3% feel confident knowing where to find accurate information about their rights, and just forty-three (43) percent have received any formal training on workplace rights. Confidence in reporting violations is low, with many youths fearing job loss, discrimination, or inaction by authorities. Workplace violations are widespread.

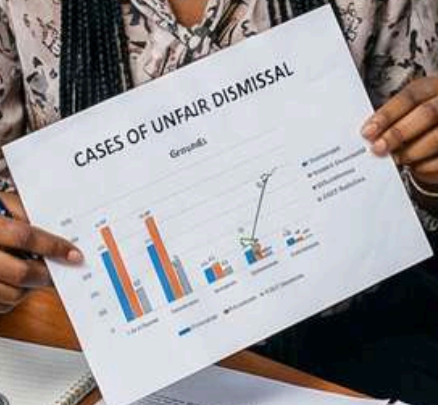
Only twenty-nine (29) percent of respondents reported not experiencing any form of workplace violation, meaning the majority have faced issues such as unpaid wages, delayed salaries, unsafe working conditions, excessive workloads, or harassment. Most violations go unreported due to fear, weak reporting systems, power imbalances, and low trust in enforcement mechanisms. Only 18.5% of respondents believe workplace violations are very rare in their communities, reinforcing the perception that exploitation is common and often accepted as normal.

Employment conditions for youth are largely informal or unstable. Only 26.2% of respondents work mostly in formal jobs, while 32.4% work mostly in informal jobs and 41.4% combine both. Informal work exposes youth to irregular income, lack of contracts, and limited social protection. Although most respondents reported not being affected by disasters in the past three years, those who were affected were often informal or self-employed workers who experienced serious livelihood disruptions, highlighting their vulnerability to shocks.

The study also identified significant skills gaps. Despite relatively high levels of education, many youth lack practical, job-ready skills such as digital skills, financial management, communication, entrepreneurship, and knowledge of workplace rights. Encouragingly, there is a strong interest in skills-building workshops, creating an opportunity for integrated programmes that combine employability, entrepreneurship, and workplace rights education.

Only 30% of respondents believe that existing government policies adequately protect youth employment and workplace rights, reflecting low trust in government among Nigerian youth. Limited awareness, weak enforcement, and negative experiences discourage young people from using formal reporting and protection systems.

The findings show that youth employment challenges in Nigeria are interconnected. Informal work, weak labour protection, limited skills development, low trust in institutions, and high exposure to exploitation continue to limit access to decent work. Addressing these issues requires coordinated action by government, employers, unions, development partners, and youth-led organisations. Strengthening labour law enforcement, expanding protections for informal workers, investing in youth skills development, and providing accessible, youth-friendly workplace rights education are essential steps toward achieving decent work for young people and advancing sustainable national development.



► INTRODUCTION

Youth employment remains a central challenge in Nigeria, with young people aged 15–35 representing a substantial proportion of the population but facing significant barriers to decent and secure work. Despite policy frameworks aimed at promoting youth employment, many youths continue to encounter unfair labour practices, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to training and information about workplace rights.

Decent work and workplace rights are essential for ensuring economic security, personal development, and social inclusion. They protect youth from exploitation, promote fair compensation, and empower them to participate meaningfully in economic life. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), which promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.

However, there has been limited youth-centred, participatory research in Nigeria to understand the realities of workplace experiences and gaps in awareness, skills, and protection. This research addresses these gaps by providing comprehensive, youth-focused insights into workplace rights, employment experiences and skills needs.

Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative (NGYouthSDGs), in partnership with UNIFOR, led this initiative to ensure that youth perspectives guide future interventions in employment and workplace rights. This research also aligns with the Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan (NIYEAP) 2021–2024, a national strategy aimed at achieving decent work for youth through improved employability, entrepreneurship, employment creation, and equality and rights. NIYEAP emphasises youth participation, labour rights awareness, and inclusive job opportunities, priorities that are central to this study.

► LITERATURE REVIEW

The Youth Employment Landscape in Nigeria

Youth employment is a complex and urgent challenge in Nigeria, as young people aged 18 - 35 make up more than 65 percent of the country's population, yet they face persistent barriers to accessing decent and secure work. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) there are significant disparities in youth employment outcomes, with unemployment rates at 6.5 percent overall, with 5.4 percent for young men and 7.8 percent for young women (Nigerian Tribune, 2025). Although unemployment statistics alone do not capture the full reality of youth employment challenges in Nigeria.

O'Higgins et al. (2023) provide a comprehensive analysis of Nigeria's youth labour market, examining school-to-work transitions and the impact of COVID-19 on youth employment. Their research highlights structural challenges that extend beyond simple unemployment figures, including high rates of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET). This phenomenon is not unique to Nigeria; ILO research shows that over 72 million youth across Africa are NEET, with increased educational attainment proving insufficient as a remedy for the lack of decent work opportunities (ILO, 2023). The challenge reflects a fundamental skills mismatch, where tertiary graduates increase faster than job creation, leaving even educated youth struggling to find appropriate employment.

The Nigerian government has attempted to address these challenges through various initiatives and policy frameworks, most notably the Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan (NIYEAP) 2021-2024, which aims to achieve decent work for youth through improved employability, entrepreneurship, employment creation, and equality and rights. The ILO supports the implementation of NIYEAP through a combination of technical advisory support, capacity building, and coordination of multi-stakeholder engagement, emphasising integrated approaches to youth employment in areas such as digital skills development, quality apprenticeships, and youth entrepreneurship (ILO, 2018). However, as subsequent research demonstrates, the gap between policy intentions and implementation remains considerable.

The Dominance of Informal Work and Decent Work Deficits

The most striking characteristic of youth employment in Nigeria is the overwhelming dominance of informal work arrangements. Recent findings from the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reveal that informal employment accounts for ninety-three (93) percent of Nigeria's workforce, with youth, women, and persons with disabilities disproportionately excluded from formal decent work opportunities (NBS 2024).

This statistic represents not merely a labour market characteristic but a fundamental challenge to achieving decent work as defined by SDG 8. Decent work requires access to productive employment with fair income, security in the workplace, social protection, and the right to organise, conditions that informal work overwhelmingly fails to provide. When 93% of Nigeria's workforce, disproportionately young people, women, and persons with disabilities, operate outside formal labour protections, the majority are structurally excluded from the very standards that SDG 8 seeks to guarantee, making universal decent work practically unachievable without first addressing informality at scale.

Price (2019) explains that most employed people in Nigeria work for themselves or their families under informal conditions, where the employment problem manifests primarily as underemployment in the informal sector rather than outright unemployment. This observation is critical: young people may be classified as "employed" in official statistics while experiencing precarious working conditions, irregular income, and lack of social protection. Olyatoye and Olutola (2021) demonstrate that thirty-five (35) percent of Nigerians aged 15-34 are unemployed, with an additional twenty-eight (28) percent officially underemployed. Their research reveals that young women from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable, often forced to accept precarious, unskilled jobs where they face heightened risks of harassment and exploitation.

Omoju and Abraham (2020) further characterise the informal sector destination for young people unable to secure formal employment, describing it as characterised by lower wages, absence of structure, lower regulation, and poor working conditions. This description aligns with broader concerns about decent work deficits in informal employment. The informal sector, while providing survival income for many youth, operates largely outside the protective framework of labour laws and regulations, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and unsafe conditions.

The implications of informal work dominance extend beyond immediate employment quality. Workers in informal arrangements typically lack written contracts, experience irregular pay, have no access to social security or health insurance, and possess limited recourse when rights are violated. For youth attempting to build careers and economic security, informal work represents not a stepping stone but often a trap of persistent precarity.

Workplace Rights Awareness, Violations, and Enforcement Challenges

While Nigeria possesses labour laws intended to protect workers' rights, significant gaps exist between legal frameworks and practical implementation. Recent research on workplace discrimination demonstrates that violations continue due to inadequate legal frameworks, obsolete legislation that is difficult to enforce, weak governing mechanisms, and workers who remain mostly unaware of or unwilling to use available complaint mechanisms (Esiaba and Kalu 2023).

This finding points to a critical challenge: the existence of laws does not automatically translate into protection for workers, particularly young workers in vulnerable employment situations.

Uzougbo et al (2023) argue that the Nigerian government and employers exploit provisions in labour law to hinder protection and advancement of fundamental human rights in the workplace. Their study suggests that implementation of these laws often has tendencies to violate workers' fundamental rights rather than protect them, pointing to systemic issues in enforcement and governance of workplace standards.

The challenge is particularly acute in the realm of occupational health and safety. While Nigeria has enacted various OHS laws and regulations, compliance remains low due to weak enforcement mechanisms, limited awareness among workers and employers, economic constraints that discourage compliance, and particular challenges posed by the large informal sector (Idubor and Oisamoje 2013). These enforcement challenges create an environment where workplace violations can occur with limited consequences, particularly affecting vulnerable workers who lack the knowledge, confidence, or power to assert their rights.

For young workers, these enforcement gaps have specific implications. Youth entering the labour market often lack experience, networks, and knowledge of their rights, making them particularly susceptible to exploitation. When violations occur, fear of job loss, uncertainty about reporting mechanisms, and justified skepticism about whether authorities will take action combine to suppress reporting and accountability. The result is a normalisation of violations where exploitative practices become accepted as standard rather than exceptional.

Youth Employment Programmes and Policy Effectiveness

The Nigerian government has implemented multiple youth employment programmes aimed at addressing unemployment and skills gaps, including YouWin, SURE-P, FADAMA-GUYS, and N-Power. However, empirical reviews of these programs reveal significant implementation challenges. Omoju et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive evaluation, finding that while numerous programs exist, they have not significantly reduced unemployment rates due to governance issues, inadequate funding, and limited institutional capacity. Their research suggests a disconnect between program design and effective delivery, with political factors, coordination challenges, and resource constraints undermining implementation.

A 2024 review examining political inclusivity and programme distribution found that youth employment initiatives face persistent obstacles such as, lack of coordination between government agencies, insufficient funding relative to needs, political exclusion that affects who benefits from programmes, and poor attention to vulnerable groups, including youth with disabilities (Mastercard Foundation , 2022).

These findings suggest that even well-intentioned policies struggle to translate into meaningful employment outcomes for youth when systemic implementation challenges are not addressed.

The gap between policy and practice affects youth trust in government interventions. When programmes are announced but poorly implemented, when access depends on political connections rather than merit, and when promised opportunities fail to materialise, young people understandably become skeptical about official commitments to addressing youth employment. This skepticism, in turn, reduces youth engagement with formal support systems and reporting mechanisms, further weakening the effectiveness of interventions intended to protect and empower them.

Skills Development and the Education-Employment Gap

A paradox characterises youth employment in Nigeria: relatively high educational attainment does not guarantee access to decent work. The challenge reflects what researchers describe as a skills mismatch, where the competencies developed through formal education do not align with labour market demands. ILO research demonstrates that increased educational attainment has not been a sufficient remedy for lack of decent work, as tertiary graduates increase faster than quality job creation (ILO, 2023). This mismatch leaves even university graduates struggling to find appropriate employment, often forcing them to accept positions far below their qualification levels or to enter informal work arrangements.

The issue extends beyond formal qualifications to encompass practical, job-ready skills. International research partnerships examining youth employment across sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, have identified critical gaps in soft skills, digital competencies, and work-based learning opportunities (Namuddu and Kakosza (2023). These multidisciplinary studies involving over 65 researchers from 18 institutions emphasise that technical education and vocational training must be complemented by broader employability skills, entrepreneurship education, and understanding of workplace rights and responsibilities.

The skills challenge intersects with other barriers youth face. Without practical skills in financial management, digital literacy, communication, and entrepreneurship, young people struggle to create their own opportunities through self-employment. Without knowledge of workplace rights and how to protect them, youth entering employment lack the tools to recognise and respond to violations. The result is that education, while valuable, proves insufficient on its own to ensure access to decent, safe, and stable work.



**TOGETHER FOR
OUR PLANET**

THE NEED FOR YOUTH CENTRED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

While the literature reviewed above provides valuable insights into youth employment challenges, policy frameworks, and labour market conditions in Nigeria, a significant gap exists in research that centres young people's own voices and lived experiences. Most existing studies examine youth employment from policy, statistical, or programme evaluation perspectives, analysing youth as subjects of interventions rather than as active participants in understanding and addressing their own employment challenges.

Limited youth-centred, participatory research exists that captures how young people themselves experience workplace violations, understand their rights, navigate informal employment, and perceive the barriers they face. Virk et al. (2024) acknowledge that their research examines the political economy and social manifestations of youth unemployment but does not deeply engage youth as research partners in defining questions and interpreting findings. Similarly, while Omoju and Abraham al. (2023) evaluate youth employment programs, their approach focuses on program outcomes rather than on how youth themselves perceive program effectiveness and what they identify as their most pressing needs.

The participatory research approach adopted in this study addresses this gap by positioning youth not only as respondents but as partners in shaping the research process, ensuring that findings reflect young people's realities, priorities, and perspectives. This methodological choice aligns with principles of youth development and empowerment, recognising that sustainable solutions to youth employment challenges must be informed by and responsive to youth voices.

Furthermore, while existing research documents high rates of informal employment and notes that workplace violations occur, limited research examines the specific experiences of violations that youth face, the reasons they choose not to report violations, and their confidence in existing protection systems. This study contributes original evidence on these dimensions, revealing not only that violations are common but, how youth understand and respond to them in contexts where formal protection mechanisms are weak or inaccessible.

Finally, the intersection of workplace rights awareness, actual experiences of violations, skills gaps, and trust in government policies has received limited integrated analysis in the Nigerian context. Most studies examine one dimension, like unemployment rates, programme effectiveness, or labour law frameworks, without capturing how these elements interconnect in young people's lived experiences. By examining awareness, experiences, skills, and policy perceptions together through a participatory lens, this research provides a more holistic understanding of the decent work challenge facing Nigerian youth.

► POSITIONING THIS STUDY

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► RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of this research is to understand the employment experiences, awareness of workplace rights, skills, and challenges faced by Nigerian youth aged 15–35, in order to inform policies and programmes that promote decent work.

Specific Research Objectives

1. Assess youth awareness and understanding of workplace rights, including access to information, training, and guidance tools such as the ILO Rights at Work Guide for Youth.
2. Examine youth employment and livelihood experiences, with particular attention to working conditions, rights violations, and reporting behaviour.
3. Identify key challenges and barriers affecting youth access to decent and secure work, especially in disaster-prone states and vulnerable contexts.
4. Analyse youth skills, capacities, and support needs, to inform targeted education, empowerment, and advocacy interventions for young people.

Research Design: This study adopted a Youth Participatory Research survey design, placing young people at the centre of the research process. Youth were engaged not only as respondents but also in shaping the research approach, ensuring that the findings reflect young people's lived experiences, realities, and perspectives on decent work and workplace rights in Nigeria.

Data Collection Methods: Data were collected primarily through a structured online survey, which enabled wide geographical coverage and participation from youth across Nigeria. To complement online data collection and improve inclusivity, trained enumerators were engaged to administer the survey, particularly in locations with limited internet access and among hard-to-reach groups. Data collection was conducted between November and December 2025.

Target Group: The study targeted Nigerian youth aged 15–35 years across diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents provided informed consent prior to completing the survey.

Sample Size: A total of 2,149 youth respondents participated in the survey, generating a robust dataset for quantitative analysis. Responses were received from all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, ensuring national coverage. While the study did not apply the NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) classification explicitly, respondents who are not in employment, education, or training are represented across the employment status categories: 20.5% are students not working, 17.8% are unemployed and actively seeking work, and 2.5% are unemployed and not seeking work. Together these approximate the NEET population. The study's engagement with the NEET discourse is further elaborated in the literature review, which situates Nigeria's youth employment challenges within the broader African NEET context.

Geographic and Demographic Coverage: Participants were drawn from all six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. The survey captured data from youth in both rural and urban settlements. In addition, persons with disabilities (PWDs) were intentionally included to ensure that the perspectives of youth facing additional barriers to decent work were represented. Of the 2,149 respondents, 351 (16.3%) identified as persons with disabilities, reflecting the study's commitment to inclusive and broad demographic representation.

Ethical Considerations: The study adhered to key ethical principles, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, had the right to skip questions, and could withdraw from the survey at any stage without consequence.

Limitations: Despite efforts to promote inclusivity, the online nature of the survey may have excluded some youth without reliable internet access, potentially introducing a bias towards urban and digitally connected respondents. While enumerators helped mitigate this limitation, some marginalised groups, including youth in inaccessible or conflict-affected areas and those with severe mobility or communication barriers, may remain underrepresented. In addition, responses were not evenly distributed across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. Nearly half of the responses came from the North Central zone, while the South East and other zones had lower participation. This uneven distribution reflects variation in the reach of the survey dissemination channels across regions and limits how well the findings represent young people nationwide.

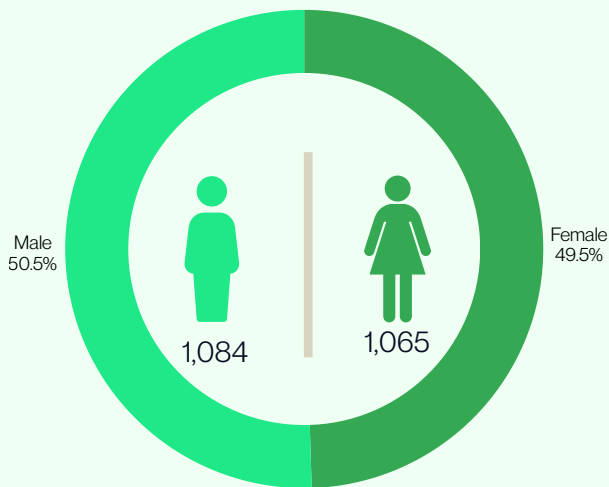
► DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the 2,149 young people who participated in the national survey. Understanding the profile of respondents provides important context for interpreting findings on workplace experiences, rights awareness, skills, and barriers to decent work.

Gender Distribution

The survey achieved a near-equal gender representation.

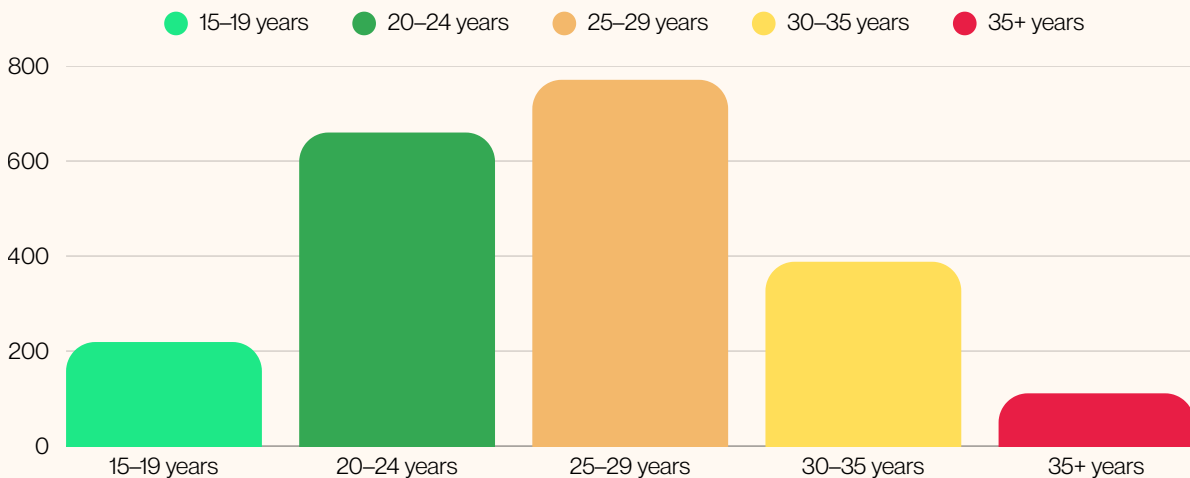
Figure 1: Gender distribution of survey respondents showing female and male



This balanced participation strengthens the credibility of the findings and allows for meaningful reflection of both male and female youth perspectives on employment and workplace rights.

Age Distribution

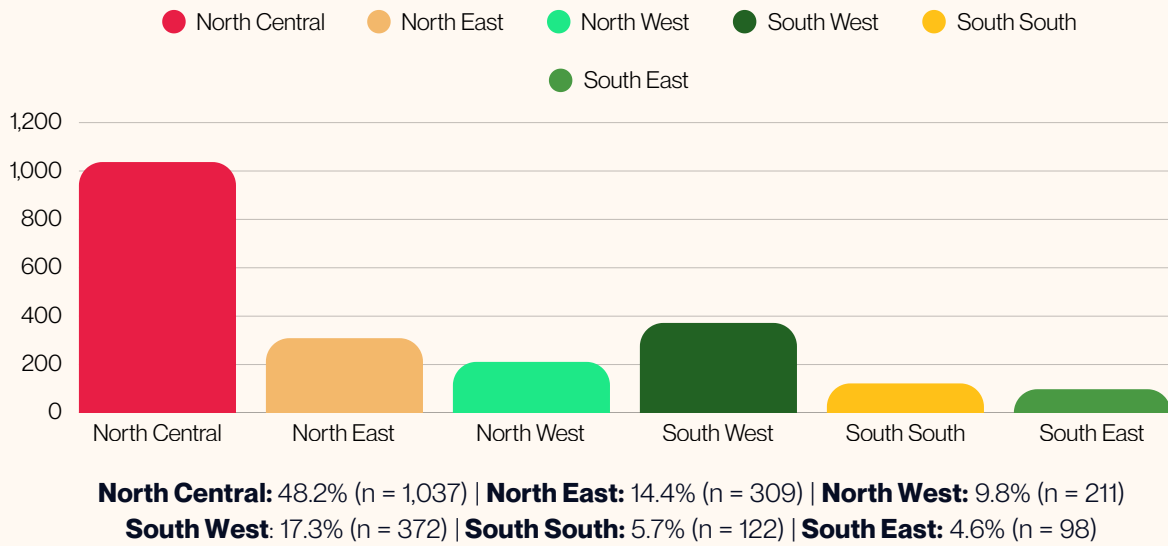
Figure 2: Age distribution of survey respondents.



Geographic Distribution

The survey achieved national coverage across all six geopolitical zones, with the following regional distribution:

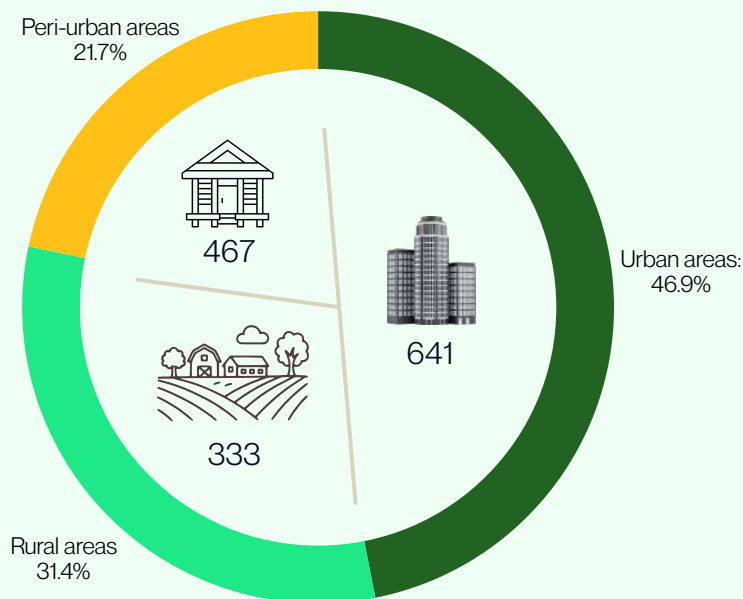
Figure 3: Geographical distribution of the survey respondents.



Type of Settlement

Respondents were drawn from diverse settlement contexts:

Figure 4: Settlement type of the survey respondent

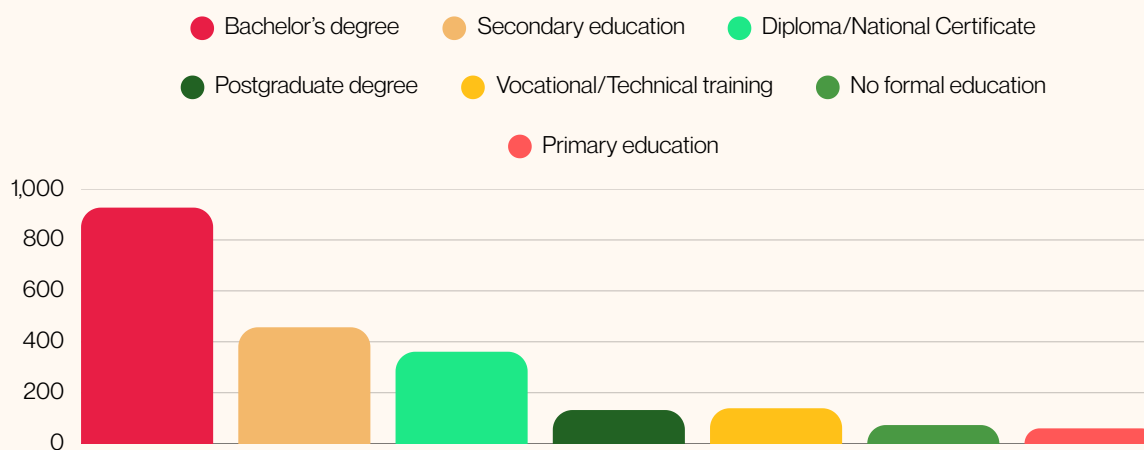


This mix allows for insights into how workplace experiences and access to decent work differ across urban, rural, and peri-urban settings.

Educational Background

The educational profile of respondents shows a relatively high level of formal education, alongside representation from vocational and non-formal pathways:

Figure 5: Educational background of the survey respondent.



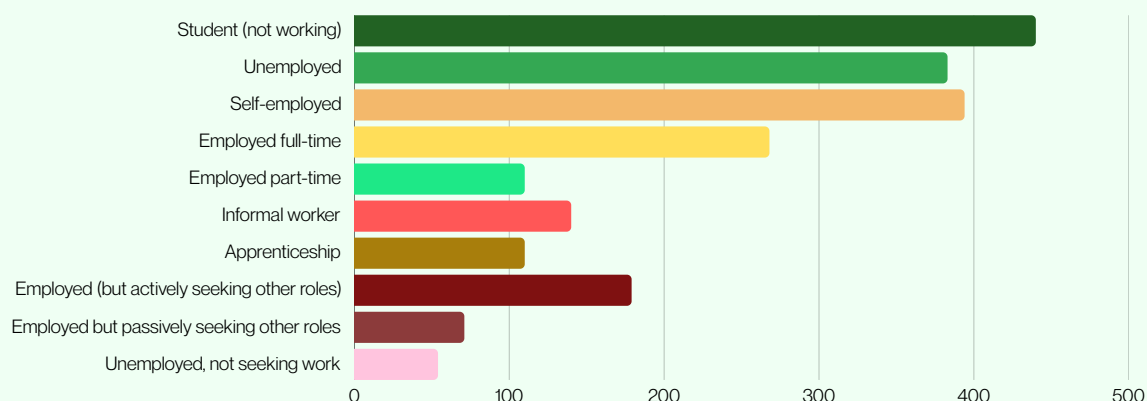
Bachelor's degree: 43.1% (n = 927) | **Secondary education:** 21.2% (n = 457)
Diploma/National Certificate: 16.8% (n = 361) | **Postgraduate degree:** 6.1% (n = 132)
Vocational/Technical training: 6.5% (n = 139) | **No formal education:** 3.4% (n = 73)
Primary education: 2.8% (n = 60)

Despite relatively high educational attainment, subsequent findings reveal that education alone does not guarantee access to decent and secure employment.

Employment Status

Respondents reported varied employment situations, highlighting the complexity of youth livelihoods in Nigeria:

Figure 6: Employment status of the respondents



A significant proportion of respondents are either unemployed, underemployed, or engaged in informal or unstable forms of work, reinforcing the urgency of interventions aimed at improving access to decent employment for young people.



ADEBAYO
- RESEARCHER

HEALTHY WELLNESS SURVEY - 2024

HEALTHY WELLNESS SURVEY - 2024

HEALTHY WELLNESS SURVEY - 2024

Awareness of Workplace Rights: The survey reveals that while some Nigerian youth know that workplace rights exist, many still lack practical knowledge and confidence to protect those rights. Among the respondents, 57.5 percent are aware that employees have legal rights at work, such as minimum wage, safe working conditions, and paid leave. However, this awareness is often general rather than detailed, meaning that many young people may not fully understand specific entitlements, like contracts, working hours, leave policies, or protection from unfair dismissal. Much of this awareness comes from personal experience rather than formal education or official guidance.

When asked how confident they were about knowing where to find accurate information on workplace rights, only 40.3 percent of respondents reported feeling confident. This suggests that more than half of the youth do not know where to turn for reliable guidance, such as labour offices, unions, legal aid services, or digital tools. Limited visibility of youth-friendly resources and guidance channels contributes to this gap.

Access to formal training is also limited. Just forty-three (43) percent of respondents reported having received information or training on workplace rights, while the majority have never participated in workshops, orientations, or structured programmes focused on labour rights. This underscores the importance of accessible guidance tools like the ILO Rights at Work Guide for Youth, which simplifies workplace rights and responsibilities for young people entering the labour market. Confidence in reporting workplace violations remains low, with only forty (40) percent of respondents feeling confident about reporting issues to authorities, unions, or employers.

These findings show a clear gap between awareness and actionable knowledge. While more than half of young people recognise that workplace rights exist, many lack the training, guidance, and confidence needed to protect themselves. The limited access to reliable information, low participation in formal training, and low confidence in reporting highlight the need for youth-focused, practical, and accessible workplace rights education. Expanding outreach through workshops, digital tools, and simplified guides like the ILO Right at Work Guide for Youth could significantly empower youth to understand and defend their workplace rights.

Experiences of Work and Workplace Violations: The survey shows that workplace violations are a common experience among Nigerian youth, and reporting these violations remains a significant challenge. Only twenty-nine (21) percent of respondents reported not experiencing any workplace violation, meaning that the majority of youth have encountered issues such as unpaid wages, unsafe working conditions, sexual or gender-based harassment, and unfair treatment at work.

Among those who experienced violations, many did not report them. The primary reasons for not reporting include fear of losing their job, lack of trust in authorities or unions, and the belief that reporting would not lead to any meaningful action. As one respondent explained, “because of the unemployment rate, reporting may lead to discrimination and be seen as insubordination.” *Another shared that they were “advised not to because of the stigma and discrimination attached to such cases.”* In addition, limited awareness and confidence in reporting mechanisms further discourage action, with some respondents stating, *“I don’t know the body to report to,” and “I had no idea how or whom to report to, and I did not feel confident that the issue would be taken seriously.”* These responses highlight the vulnerability of young workers, particularly those in informal or insecure employment where protection mechanisms are weak or absent.

Perceptions of the prevalence of workplace violations indicate that only 18.5% of respondents considered such violations very rare in their communities. This suggests that many youths view unfair practices as widespread and systemic, which reduces the likelihood of reporting and allows those responsible to avoid being held accountable. This perception is reinforced by respondents who noted that *“authorities are also perpetrating it, so it’s shelved underground,”* and that *“our bosses are the power brokers, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN).”* Such views point to deep power imbalances and low trust in accountability structures.

These findings highlight that workplace violations are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern affecting youth employment in Nigeria. The combination of informal work, fear of retaliation, power imbalances, and limited or inaccessible reporting mechanisms increases the risk of exploitation. Addressing these challenges will require the establishment of accessible and trusted reporting channels, stronger enforcement of labour rights, and targeted support for young people in both formal and informal sectors.

These findings are consistent with ILO Recommendation No. 130 (1967), which establishes that workers must have access to safe, fair, and effective mechanisms for examining and resolving grievances related to rights violations, including unpaid wages, unsafe working conditions, discrimination, harassment, and denial of freedom of association. The survey reveals a significant gap between this normative expectation and the lived realities of Nigerian youth, underscoring the urgency of establishing accessible and trusted reporting channels.

Barriers To Decent Work: The survey findings show that young people in Nigeria face multiple and overlapping barriers to accessing decent, safe, and stable work. These challenges are closely linked to the structure of the labour market, limited economic opportunities, weak protection systems, and broader social and security concerns.



Informal Work and Employment Insecurity

A major barrier identified through the survey is the heavy reliance on informal work. Only about 26% of respondents work mostly in formal jobs, while 32% work mostly in informal settings and 41% combine both formal and informal work. This means that the majority of young people are working in arrangements that often lack written contracts, job security, social protection, and clear workplace rights. As a result, many youths experience unstable income and are more exposed to exploitation.

This reality is reflected in the voices of respondents. One young person simply stated, *“I was not paid for two months.”* Another added, *“Salaries are delayed intentionally or even not paid at all in the workplace. It’s a very Nigerian thing.”* These experiences show how informal employment leaves young workers vulnerable and powerless, especially when there are no clear reporting or enforcement mechanisms.



Limited Job Opportunities and Access Barriers

Beyond informality, the lack of available jobs emerged as one of the most common barriers to decent work. Respondents explained that even when jobs exist, access is often influenced by personal connections rather than skills or qualifications. This creates frustration for young people who are trained and willing to work but are locked out of opportunities.

As one respondent noted, *“Most times you don’t get a job unless you know someone.”* Another shared that *“Some workplaces promote people based on connections, not qualifications.”* These perceptions reinforce a sense of exclusion and weaken trust in fair recruitment and merit-based systems.



Limited Access to Finance and Livelihood Sustainability

The survey also highlights limited access to finance as a major challenge, particularly for self-employed youth and those trying to start small businesses. Many respondents reported difficulties accessing loans, start-up capital, tools, or equipment. Low and irregular income further reduces their ability to sustain livelihoods or expand their work.

One respondent explained, *“I wanted to start a small business, but I couldn’t get the money or tools to continue.”* Another emphasised the structural nature of the problem, saying, *“A microfinance bank should be created to give loans to support the youth.”* These voices underline the need for affordable and youth-friendly financial support systems.



Discrimination and Unequal Treatment

Discrimination was also identified as a key barrier to decent work. Respondents reported unequal treatment based on age, gender, health status, or perceived power differences in the workplace. Older youth, particularly those above 30, noted that age can be used to deny opportunities or promotions, while others highlighted gender bias and unfair workplace dynamics.

One respondent shared, *“Older adults most times think young people don’t need to be treated well, especially when it comes to pay.”* Another stated, *“I was deprived of a promotion I was most qualified for because of age.”* These experiences show how discrimination often overlaps with other challenges, deepening vulnerability for already marginalised youth.

Barriers to Decent Work for Youth with Disabilities

The survey highlights that young people with disabilities face unique and intensified challenges in finding decent work. All 351 respondents who identified as persons with disabilities reported working in the informal sector, showing how formal employment opportunities are largely out of reach for this group. Working informally often means unpredictable income, no job contracts, and little or no social protection, leaving these young people especially vulnerable.

Beyond the lack of formal opportunities, many youth with disabilities experience discrimination and exclusion in their workplaces. Some described a lack of support or accommodation, with one respondent saying, *“Work places should help those with disabilities leave well.”* Others spoke of feeling unsafe or overlooked, ***“We are really facing insecurity.”*** These experiences show how discrimination can make it even harder to keep a job, feel safe, or be treated with dignity.

The impact of disasters and emergencies in the past three years has also been particularly severe for youth with disabilities. Unlike most respondents, who reported minimal disruption, all participants with disabilities said these events affected their ability to work or earn a living. This highlights how vulnerable this group is, especially when working in informal settings without safety nets or support systems.

Many respondents expressed hope for greater inclusion and fairness, particularly from government institutions. One young person stressed, *“The government should ensure PWD have equal rights in government provided opportunities.”* These voices underline the urgent need for policies that include youth with disabilities, accessible workplaces, and targeted protections ensuring that no young person is left behind in the pursuit of safe, dignified, and sustainable work.

Insecurity and Unsafe Environments

Insecurity and unsafe environments were also mentioned as barriers to work. In areas affected by crime, conflict, or general insecurity, young people face restricted movement, disrupted businesses, and reduced job opportunities. Fear and instability make it harder to secure or maintain employment, particularly for informal workers and small business owners.

As one respondent noted, “Insecurity makes it difficult to keep or even look for work. ” *Another added that “Unsafe environments reduce opportunities and affect businesses.”*

Disasters and Emergencies

Regarding disasters and emergencies, the survey shows that most respondents (62.3%) reported that events in the past three years did not affect their ability to work or earn. Many indicated that they had not experienced such disruptions or that these events did not significantly change their livelihoods.

Among the 37.7 percent of respondents whose ability to work or earn was disrupted, participants described impacts consistent with four main categories of shocks: flooding, conflict or insecurity, fire outbreaks, and economic shocks. Respondents reported consequences including loss of businesses and capital, displacement, reduced income, inability to travel for work, and difficulty meeting basic needs such as food. These disruptions were particularly severe for those in informal or self-employed arrangements, who had no contracts, savings buffers, or social protection to fall back on.

The experiences of youth with disabilities show just how unevenly disasters and emergencies can hit. While most young people reported that their work or income hadn't been affected, every respondent with a disability said they had been impacted in the past three years. This highlights how floods, conflict, economic shocks, and insecurity often hit youth with disabilities the hardest, especially those in informal work who don't have support systems, accessible workplaces, or social safety nets to fall back on.

In summary, the survey shows that barriers to decent work for young people in Nigeria are closely connected. While most respondents were not affected by disasters, informal employment, limited job opportunities, lack of access to finance, discrimination, and insecurity continue to make decent work hard to achieve. For youth affected by emergencies, the risks are even greater especially for young people with disabilities, who often face additional challenges due to limited support, accessibility barriers, and the absence of social protection.

Addressing these challenges requires holistic solutions that considers the diverse experiences of all youths including those with disabilities. This includes expanding formal job opportunities, strengthening protections for informal workers, improving access to finance and skills development, reducing discrimination and insecurity, and providing targeted support for youth affected by shocks. These steps are essential to enable young people to access dignified, safe, and sustainable work.

Skills and Aspirations: The survey explored youth skills, capacities, and aspirations in relation to accessing decent work, highlighting both existing competencies and gaps that could be addressed through targeted training and empowerment programs.

Current Skills of Youth: Respondents reported a range of skills, reflecting diverse educational backgrounds and work experiences. While some young people possess technical and professional skills gained through formal education or apprenticeships, many highlighted gaps in practical, employable skills that are directly relevant to securing sustainable work. This aligns with the broader trend in the Nigerian labour market, where skills mismatch is a persistent challenge.

Skills Needed for Decent Work: When asked which skills would most help them secure decent work, youth emphasised the need for employability, entrepreneurship, and workplace rights knowledge. The survey indicates that despite relatively high levels of formal education among respondents (43.1% holding a bachelor's degree), there remains a significant gap in applied skills, including digital literacy, financial management, communication, and understanding of workplace regulations. These gaps limit the ability of youth to navigate both formal and informal work environments confidently.

Interest in Skills-Building Workshops: The survey showed strong enthusiasm for youth-focused training opportunities. Most respondents expressed willingness to participate in workshops on workplace rights, entrepreneurship, and employability, reflecting a clear demand for practical, actionable learning experiences. This presents an opportunity to bridge knowledge gaps and strengthen youth agency in labour markets. The importance of tools such as the ILO Right at Work Guide for Youth is underscored here, as it provides simplified, youth-friendly guidance on workplace rights and responsibilities, helping young people understand how to protect themselves and thrive professionally.

These findings highlight a dual challenge: youth have varying levels of existing skills but face gaps that limit access to decent work, especially in informal or vulnerable contexts. The high interest in training indicates that youth are motivated to improve their employability and safeguard their rights, suggesting that investments in skills development, mentorship, and practical guidance could have an immediate and meaningful impact. Programmes that combine technical skills with rights education, entrepreneurship training, and career navigation support are likely to be the most effective in empowering youth to secure fair, safe, and sustainable employment opportunities.

Trust in Government and Policy Perception: Youth perceptions of government protection and policy effectiveness play a crucial role in shaping confidence in accessing decent work and reporting workplace violations. The survey examined youth trust in governmental measures, policies, and interventions related to employment and workplace rights.

Only 30% of respondents agreed that government policies adequately protect youth employment and rights, reflecting limited confidence in the effectiveness of existing policy frameworks. Many young people perceive a gap between policy intentions and practical enforcement. Experiences of unsafe working conditions, unreported violations, and inadequate social protection contribute to this low level of trust.

Even where policies exist, awareness among youth remains low. Without clear information on how to access protections or seek redress, young people are less likely to rely on government mechanisms, often turning instead to informal networks for guidance and support.

This lack of trust affects youth behaviour in reporting workplace violations. Fear of retaliation, bureaucratic delays, and perceptions of inefficiency discourage young people from formally reporting abuses. Consequently, many workplace violations go unaddressed, particularly for youth engaged in informal or precarious work.

Policy Priorities Suggested by Youth: Respondents identified several key areas for improvement to enhance youth protection and confidence in government:

1. **Strengthening enforcement of labour laws:** Ensuring violations are addressed promptly and fairly.
2. **Expanding protections to informal workers:** Many youths rely on informal work, which remains largely unregulated and vulnerable.
3. **Integrating workplace rights education into youth programmes:** Raising awareness of existing protections and rights is critical to building confidence and agency among youth.

The results highlight that youth trust in government is closely tied to perceived effectiveness and accessibility of policies rather than the mere existence of laws. Strengthening the link between policy design and real-world implementation is essential to empower youth, enhance reporting, and reduce workplace exploitation.

Building confidence among young people will require transparent enforcement, active engagement, and continuous communication. Special attention should be given to informal workers, women, and other vulnerable groups to ensure that government interventions are inclusive and responsive to the realities of youth employment in Nigeria.



The findings of this youth participatory survey reveal several important insights that cut across awareness, experiences, skills, and policy perceptions. These insights provide a clear understanding of the current state of youth employment and workplace rights in Nigeria, highlighting areas that need urgent attention.

Awareness Does Not Equal Protection: While 57.5 percent of respondents are aware that employees have legal rights at work, and many can identify general rights such as minimum wage, paid leave, and safe working conditions, practical knowledge and the ability to act on these rights remain limited. Only 40.3% feel confident knowing where to access accurate information, and just forty-three (43) percent have received any formal training or guidance on workplace rights. Confidence in reporting violations is even lower, at forty (40) percent, reflecting a significant gap between awareness and effective protection.

Youth responses clearly show that knowing rights in theory does not mean being able to enforce them in practice. Many young people are unsure where to report violations or fear the consequences of speaking up. As one respondent stated, “Even if my labour rights have been violated, I don't know where to report.” Another highlighted the lack of knowledge and guidance, saying, “I will say most young persons don't know their rights at the workplace. So I suggest the government should look into the following: Workshops on workplace rights should be introduced at secondary schools, universities, and NYSC camps... Companies should adopt transparent HR policies and conduct regular ethics training.”

These voices reinforce the survey findings: youth are aware of their rights in principle, but they often lack the tools, guidance, and safe channels to enforce these rights. Without accessible information, trusted reporting mechanisms, and youth-friendly guidance, awareness alone is not enough to ensure protection or accountability.

High Prevalence of Workplace Violations: The survey provides specific, data-grounded evidence that workplace violations are common and systemic, not isolated: 71% of respondents reported experiencing at least one form of workplace violation, only 18.5% consider such violations rare in their communities, and just 40% feel confident about reporting violations when they occur. Together, these figures demonstrate a pattern of widespread exploitation that is perceived as normal and one that is structurally reinforced by fear of retaliation, weak enforcement, and inaccessible reporting mechanisms. Despite this high prevalence, many youths who experienced violations did not report them, mainly due to fear of losing their jobs, lack of trust in authorities, and uncertainty about reporting procedures.

Several respondents described how violations such as delayed salaries, unpaid overtime, and excessive workloads have become normalised. One youth explained, “A young man named Musa got a job as a store assistant in a small supermarket. He worked long hours, sometimes 12 hours a day, but was only paid for 8. Whenever he asked about overtime, the supervisor told him, *“If you can't manage, we'll hire someone else.”* Another noted how silence is often a survival strategy, stating, *“I once worked in a place where young staff were overworked but afraid to speak up. It taught me that workplace rights go beyond salary. People need clear roles, fair treatment, and a safe space to share concerns. When young workers feel respected and heard, they perform better and grow. My advice is for every workplace to create that kind of environment.”*

Many respondents highlighted how unfair treatment and exploitation are routine: *“Most of the time you don't get a job unless you are from a particular region.”* These findings show that workplace violations are common, often go unreported, and are sometimes seen as normal, especially where unemployment is high, and many people work informally. Fear, weak reporting systems, and little accountability make it easy for unfair practices to continue. This highlights the urgent need for stringent rules, easier ways to report problems, and better protection for young workers who speak up.

Informality and Vulnerability: Youth employment in Nigeria is marked by a mix of formal and informal work. About twenty-six (26) percent of respondents work mostly in formal settings, thirty-two (32) percent mostly in informal work, and forty-one (41) percent in a combination of both. Informal work often comes with irregular pay, unsafe conditions, and limited legal protections, making young people more vulnerable to economic shocks and disasters.

The survey found that most young people (62.3%) reported that disasters or emergencies in the past three years did not affect their work. However, for those who were affected, the consequences were often severe. These individuals typically worked in informal or self-employed roles, where the absence of contracts or social protections meant that losing a job, clients, or equipment could immediately threaten their income and livelihood.

Respondent's experiences illustrate this vulnerability. One youth described, *“I was a trained graphic designer, but because I couldn't find stable job opportunities in my field, I accepted a position as a receptionist just to earn a living. Unfortunately, the experience was very discouraging.*

My salary was often delayed, there was no formal contract, and I had no clear job description. I was asked to work overtime without pay... it made me realise how unprotected many young workers are, especially when they are desperate to earn an income.”

Another respondent highlighted the constant risk of informal work: *“I have a BSc. Agricultural Extension. Certificate. I'm nearly 30 years old. I've found it difficult to apply and get jobs in my field or any field. I currently work as an unskilled worker at a tile-making factory in Sagamu (a city in Ogun state), I have been there for over a year now as a casual staff member. I look forward to more in life.”*

These accounts demonstrate that informal work often leaves youth exposed to economic shocks, disasters, and exploitation. Without legal protection, guaranteed pay, or workplace safety, even minor disruptions can escalate into serious livelihood crises. Strengthening social protection, formalising work opportunities, and supporting informal workers are essential to reduce their vulnerability and ensure more stable, decent work for young people.

Youth with Disabilities Face Greater Challenges: Young people with disabilities experience extra hurdles in accessing decent work. The survey shows that all PWD respondents work in the informal sector and have been affected by disasters or emergencies in the past three years. They also face discrimination, insecurity, and exclusion from formal jobs. These findings highlight the urgent need for labour policies, workplaces, and support systems that are inclusive and protective, so that youth with disabilities are not left behind in efforts to create safe, fair, and sustainable work opportunities.

Skills Gaps and Training Needs: The survey highlights a clear skills gap between what young people currently have and what is required for decent work. While many youth possess basic education or technical skills, they report lacking workplace-ready digital skills, entrepreneurship and business planning skills, and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These were consistently ranked as top priorities by respondents, indicating where support is most urgently needed.

This gap reflects a mismatch between existing skills and labour market expectations, where employers increasingly demand practical digital competence, adaptable soft skills, and real-world business knowledge. The strong interest in skills-building workshops points to an opportunity for targeted, youth-friendly training that bridges this gap by combining employability, entrepreneurship, and workplace rights education.

Limited Trust in Government and Policy Effectiveness: Only 30% of respondents agree that government policies adequately protect youth employment and rights, indicating low confidence in policy enforcement. Many youth perceive a disconnect between existing labour laws and their real-world implementation. Lack of trust discourages reporting of violations and reduces engagement with formal systems, further reinforcing the vulnerabilities of young workers, particularly women, informal workers, and other marginalised groups.

Youth-Centred Solutions are Important: The survey shows that young people want to help shape solutions to the challenges they face at work. They want stronger enforcement of labour laws, better protection for informal workers, and easier access to workplace rights education. Their interest in workshops, guidance tools like the ILO *Rights at Work Guide for Youth*, and participatory programmes shows that interventions should be practical, youth-friendly, and inclusive.

► RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the survey findings, the following recommendations are proposed to improve youth access to decent work, strengthen workplace rights, and empower youth in Nigeria, with particular attention to inclusive approaches for persons with disabilities (PWDs).

A. Government and Policymakers

1. Strengthen Labour Law Enforcement

- Review and update normative legal frameworks, including outdated legislation, to ensure they reflect current labour market realities, particularly the scale of informal work and align with international labour standards. Existing provisions that may inadvertently undermine rather than protect workers' rights should be identified and reformed.
- Ensure labour regulations are effectively implemented, particularly in informal and vulnerable sectors.
- Establish accessible mechanisms for reporting violations and monitoring compliance.

3. Integrate Workplace Rights Education into Youth Programmes

- Promote the use of tools like the ILO Rights at Work Guide for Youth across schools, vocational centres, and youth empowerment initiatives.
- Include rights awareness in disaster-preparedness and employment programmes.

4. Disaster-Responsive Employment Policies

- Develop frameworks to protect youth employment during emergencies and natural disasters. These should include: emergency income-support schemes for informal and self-employed youth; fast-tracked skills retraining for workers displaced by shocks; mobile labour rights services deployable in disaster-affected areas; and accessible social protection floors for informal youth workers that remain operative during crises. Given that affected respondents were predominantly informal workers without safety nets, such frameworks must explicitly prioritise this group.

B. Employers and Private Sector

1. Fair Recruitment, Contracts, Wages and Remuneration Transparency

- Implement standardised contracts and transparent salary structures to prevent exploitation.

2. Safe Reporting Mechanisms

- Establish accessible grievance systems that allow youth to report violations without fear of retaliation.

3. Youth-Friendly Workplace Practices

- Promote mentorship, flexible work arrangements, and capacity-building opportunities for young employees.

C. Labour Unions and Institutions

1. Youth-Focused Outreach

- Conduct awareness campaigns targeted at young workers, including informal sector participants.

2. Simplified Rights Education

- Translate legal and workplace rights into youth-friendly formats and local languages.

3. Digital Reporting Platforms

- Provide mobile-friendly tools for reporting workplace violations, tracking complaints, and accessing guidance.
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D. Development Partners and Financing

1. Fund Youth-Led Decent Work Initiatives

- Support programmes that empower youth to monitor labour rights, provide peer training, and promote employment opportunities.

2. Support Skills-to-Jobs Pipelines

- Invest in vocational training, entrepreneurship incubators, and digital skills programmes tailored to youth market needs.

3. Invest in Data-Driven Youth Programmes

- Fund research and monitoring initiatives to track youth employment trends, workplace rights violations, and skills gaps.

E. Youth and Civil Society

1. Peer Education on Workplace Rights

- Promote awareness campaigns led by youth for youth, using social media, workshops, and community forums.

2. Youth Monitoring and Reporting

- Encourage collective monitoring of labour standards and community-level reporting of workplace violations.

3. Collective Advocacy

- Facilitate youth-led advocacy to influence policymaking, workplace reforms, and employer accountability.

► CONCLUSION

This study shows that many young people in Nigeria face serious challenges in accessing decent, safe, and stable work. While some youth know that workplace rights exist, many lack clear information, practical guidance, and confidence to protect these rights. As a result, workplace violations such as unpaid wages, unsafe conditions, and unfair treatment are common and often go unreported.

Informal work dominates youth employment, leaving many young people without contracts, job security, or social protection. Even educated youth are forced to accept poor working conditions due to limited job opportunities, lack of access to finance, discrimination, and weak enforcement of labour laws. Skills gaps also limit access to better jobs, although many young people show strong interest in training, entrepreneurship, and workplace rights education.

The findings highlight the need for urgent and coordinated action. Improving labour law enforcement, expanding protections for informal workers, increasing access to skills development and finance, and providing youth-friendly workplace rights education are critical. Empowering young people and involving them in solutions is essential for achieving decent work and supporting Nigeria's long-term economic and social development.

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For any questions or concerns about the Report kindly reach out to us. Also, feel free to stay connected to us to learn more about our work towards meaningful youth engagement, in Nigeria.

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