

GENDER DISPARITIES IN YOUTH SKILL ACQUISITION AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The issue of gender disparities in skill acquisition and employment outcomes has garnered increasing attention in the context of developing economies. In Nigeria, particularly in the Southwest geo-political zone, youth unemployment remains a pressing challenge, worsened by socio-cultural norms that often disadvantage women. This study analysed the extent of gender disparities in youth skill acquisition and subsequent employment outcomes, providing empirical evidence to inform policy and practice. This study investigated the gender disparities in skill acquisition and employment outcomes among youth in Southwest Nigeria, utilizing a quantitative secondary data approach. Quantitative data of the National Demography and Health Survey (NDHS) 2023 - 2024 of youth demographic data in Southwest Nigeria was sourced. The findings revealed significant differences in access to skill acquisition programmes, employment opportunities, and overall economic outcomes between male and female youths. The study concludes with recommendations for policy interventions aimed at promoting gender equity in skill development and employment

Keywords: Gender, Disparities, Employment, Inequality, Skill

Introduction

Gender as a term describes the roles, behaviors, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men. Gender interacts with, but it is different from, the binary categories of biological sex (World Health Organization, 2024). Sex is the state of being male or female. Disparity, on the other hand, can be defined as a state of being unequal or unfair. Gender disparity is therefore seen as the inequality between the male and female sex or unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their sexes. The concept of gender disparity is wide; it is expressed over the entire population and captures those below a certain poverty line (World Bank, 2021). This form of disparity or inequality is associated with power imbalance and segregation, economically or socially. It often intersects with other forms of inequality such as class and sexual orientation which in turn leads to disadvantages for one group (naturally women). The presence of barriers mostly drives inequality (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021). These barriers hinder upward movement in social classes through income and wealth crystallization. These barriers

give certain group of people access to a better stake of societal resources and opportunities, hence make them better off than their counterpart (Ajao *et al.*, 2023). Goal 5 of the sustainable development goal (SDG) is primarily focused on gender equality. So, of no doubt the global attention is not only on achieving gender equality but also empowering all women and girls. Aside from agriculture, women in paid employment account for 41% against 35% as of 1990 (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021). The SDG goal 5 aim to empower all women and girls to ensure gender equity and ultimately end all acts of disparity and discrimination against the females. The fight for or against gender inequality and disparity is a dialogue that has remained in the corridor of global discussion. Studies in the past, had opined that gender inequality might actually lead to an increase in economic growth (UN Women, 2020). However, Oduro, Osei & Osei-Tutu, (2019) have revealed that gender inequality have negative impacts on the economy of any country or nation. Gender disparity is a problematic concern as it has been proven to lowers the wellbeing of the citizen and is regarded as a form of injustice in the very conception of equity (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021).

The issues of gender disparities in skill acquisition and employment outcomes have garnered increasing attention in developing economies. In Nigeria, particularly in the Southwest geo-political zone of Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti states has seen significant youth-centric public policies where youth unemployment remains a pressing challenge and persistent gender disparities hinder equitable skill acquisition and employment; this is exacerbated by socio-cultural norms that often disadvantage women (Alabi *et al.*, 2023). Gender disparities in education and employment have been extensively documented in various perspectives. Kabeer (2016) is of the opinion that access to education and skill development is crucial for economic empowerment, yet women often face systemic barriers. In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (2020) reported that female youth are less likely to participate in vocational training programmes compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, studies by Oduro *et al.* (2019) indicate that cultural norms and expectations significantly influence the types of skills acquired by young women, often steering them towards traditionally female-dominated sectors with limited economic returns.

The federal and state governments have engaged different strategies to curb and battle disempowerment among youth; the cancer seems to have defied them all. However, the utilization of the strategies is not just a matter of providing specific number of jobs but it is a matter of deliberate enrolment of youth for skill acquisition that will give self-employment and reliance which business education offers the opportunity. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), the youth-unemployment rate in

Nigeria was 34.9% in 2020, an increase from 29.7% in 2018 (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2021). Overall unemployment is also high and increased from 2.3% in 2000 to 7.5% in 2015, 20.4% in 2017, 27.1% in 2020, and further to 33.3% in 2020. The proportion of Nigerian youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) rose from 24.8% in 2011 to 28.1% in 2019, suggesting declining opportunities for social mobility and economic potentials for young people in Nigeria (Omoju *et al.*, 2023).

In a study that examined women's participation in skill acquisition for empowerment in Anambra state, Nigeria, it was reported that household burden (78.1%), the influence of husbands (76.4%), and religious/cultural belief (41.9%) were top inhibitors to skill acquisition and utilisation by women. These factors hinder women's empowerment since adult literacy and skill acquisition strongly correlate with women's empowerment and self-reliance (World Bank, 2024). Omoju *et al.* (2023) asserted that young people (15-34 years) account for 46% of the population of Nigeria. Among youth, young women accounted for 52% vs. 48% for young men. Nigerian young people are excluded from full participation in the labor market, however. Only 37% of youth are in full employment (working at least forty hours per week), down from 71% in 2010. Also, youth unemployment increased from 7% in 2010 to 35% in 2020.

Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) is used as the Theoretical frameworks for this study. It emphasizes the importance of individual agency and access to resources in achieving economic outcomes. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding how gendered experiences shape skill acquisition and employment opportunities. This approach however moves beyond focusing solely on income or resources to consider the capabilities that individuals can convert into valuable doings and beings, such as being educated, employed or participating in society. By analysing gender gaps in these capabilities, particularly in education, and economic participation, the capability approach highlights the importance of empowering women and girls to access the resources and opportunities necessary for skill development and overall well-being (Badiru & Adedoyin, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to investigate gender disparity in youth skill acquisition and employment outcomes in southwest Nigeria.

The Specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine youths' NEET and unemployment rate in South Western Nigeria;

- ii. investigate the level of youths’ labour force participation;
- iii. identify youths’ employment type; and
- iv. examine youths involvement in sectoral employment in South Western Nigeria.

Research Method

This study employs a quantitative secondary data approach. Quantitative data of the National Demography and Health Survey (NDHS) 2023 - 2024 of youth demographic data in Southwest Nigeria was used, focusing on their access to skill acquisition programs and employment outcomes. The survey included questions on demographic information, types of skills acquired and employment status. Data were analyzed using statistical software for quantitative data.

Results

Table 1: NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) Rates (Ages 15–35)

Sex	NEET (%)
Female	15.9
Male	15.5

Female’s slice slightly larger, reflecting marginally higher exclusion. More young women than men are disengaged from education, training, and employment opportunities in the Southwest.

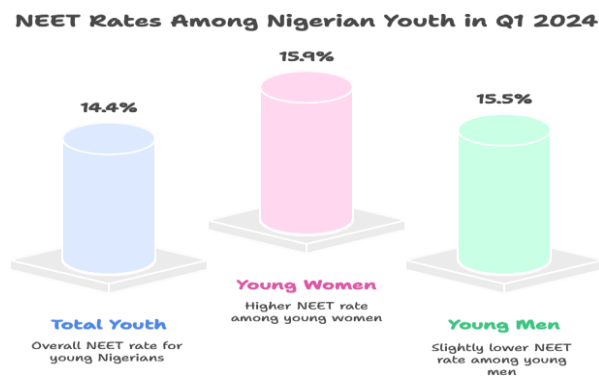


Figure 1: NEET Rates Among Nigerian Youth in Q1 2024

Table 2: Unemployment Rate by Sex (Q2 2024)

Sex	Unemployment (%)
Female	5.1
Male	3.4

Female are higher than Male by 1.7 percentage points. This implies Female youth face disproportionately higher unemployment despite near-equal labor force participation.

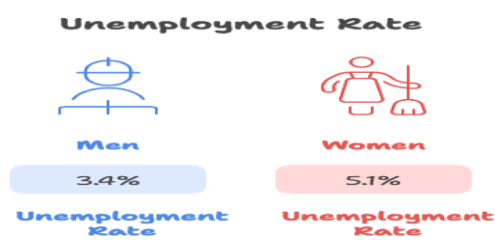


Figure 2: Unemployment Rate by Sex

Table 3: Labour Force Participation Rate (Ages 15–35)

Sex	Participation (%)
Female	79.1
Male	79.9

Equal-height bars, with Male slightly edging Female by 0.8%. Both genders participate actively, but outcomes (unemployment, job type) differ significantly.

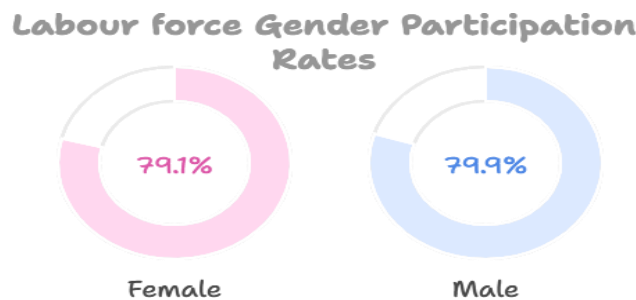


Figure 3: Labour Force Participation Rate (Ages 15–35)

Table 4: Employment Type Distribution

Employment Type	Male (%)	Female (%)
Self-employed	82.2	88.3
Wage Employed	17.8	11.7

Self-employed section larger for female while wage-employed section larger for Male. This interprets as, young women are overwhelmingly self-employed, often in informal or subsistence activities.

Table 5: Sectoral Employment Distribution (Youth)

Sector	Male (%)	Female (%)
Construction/Industry	21.5	7.8
Services/Trade	35.2	48.9
Agriculture	43.3	43.3

Higher male participation in construction/industry while, higher female representation in services/trade. This implies that female youth are underrepresented in skilled, formal-sector jobs.



Figure 4: Gender Distribution in Employment Sectors

Table 6: Summary Dashboard Interpretation

Indicator	Who's Worse Affected	Notable Gap
NEET Rates	Female	+0.4%
Unemployment	Female	+1.7%
Self-Employment Dominance	Female	+6.1%
Formal/Technical Employment	Female	-13.7% (Construction/Industry)

It can be clearly seen that across every dimension of quantitative analysis of this study, unemployment, type of employment, and sectoral placement, young women in Southwest Nigeria remain at a disadvantage despite comparable labour force participation rates. The data points to entrenched gender disparities/inequalities in skill acquisition, technical job access, and program reach.

Findings and Discussion

NEET and Unemployment Rates

The study reveals a slightly higher NEET rate for female youth (15.9%) compared to male youth (15.5%) aged 15–35 in Southwest Nigeria. This marginal gap suggests that young women face greater barriers to engaging in education, employment, or training, potentially due to socio-cultural factors such as early marriage or domestic responsibilities. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported a national youth NEET rate of 13.7% in Q3 2023, with women disproportionately represented in informal and precarious work, which aligns with these findings (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The higher female NEET rate has financial implications, as economic inactivity reduces women’s access to income-generating opportunities, limiting household financial stability and long-term wealth accumulation (World Bank, 2024).

The unemployment rate further underscores gender disparities, with females recording 5.1% compared to 3.4% for males in Q2 2024. This aligns with NBS data indicating that women in Nigeria face higher unemployment rates (6.0% in urban areas in Q3 2023) and are more likely to be in low-paying, informal jobs (National Bureau

of Statistics, 2023). The gender gap in unemployment reflects structural barriers, including limited access to high-skill jobs and gender biases in hiring, which constrain women's economic contributions and financial independence (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). From a financial perspective, higher female unemployment exacerbates income inequality and restricts access to financial services like credit, perpetuating economic vulnerability (World Bank, 2024).

Labor Force Participation

The labor force participation rate for youth aged 15–35 shows near parity, with females at 79.1% and males at 79.9%. This is consistent with NBS findings, which reported a national labor force participation rate of 79.5% in Q3 2023, with men slightly higher at 77.5% compared to women at 77.1% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; MyJobMag, 2025). The high participation rate reflects economic necessity in Southwest Nigeria's informal economy, where youth, particularly women, engage in low-productivity work to meet basic needs. However, the near-equal participation masks disparities in job quality and financial returns, as women are more likely to be in precarious, low-paying roles (78.9% of women vs. 54.3% of men in 2023, according to World Bank data) (MyJobMag, 2025). This suggests that while women are active in the labor market, their economic contributions are constrained by limited access to high-value sectors and financial resources.

Employment Type

The data show that 82.2% of female youth and 88.3% of male youth are self-employed, reflecting the dominance of the informal sector in Southwest Nigeria's economy. This aligns with NBS data indicating that 87.3% of workers were self-employed in Q3 2023, with only 12.7% in wage employment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The high prevalence of self-employment, particularly among women, is driven by limited formal job opportunities and insufficient income from formal employment, as noted in the MoniePoint Informal Economy Report (MyJobMag, 2025). However, self-employment often lacks financial security, with limited access to benefits like pensions or health insurance, which disproportionately affects women due to their lower access to capital and entrepreneurial networks (ILO, 2024).

From a financial perspective, the reliance on self-employment highlights the need for gender-sensitive financial inclusion initiatives. Women's lower self-employment rate compared to men suggests barriers to accessing startup capital or markets, which could be addressed through microfinance programs or digital banking solutions tailored for female entrepreneurs (World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2024). Such interventions could enhance women's financial resilience and contribute to economic growth by increasing their productivity and income potential.

Sectoral Employment

The sectoral distribution reveals significant gender disparities, with males dominating the construction/industry sector (21.5% vs. 7.8% for females) and females over represented in the service/trade sector (48.9% vs. 35.2% for males). Agriculture employs both genders equally (43.3%). These findings are consistent with global trends, where services have become the largest employer of youth, accounting for 45.9% of global youth employment by 2021, while construction plays a growing role for young men (ILO, 2024). In Nigeria, agriculture and trade are major employers, but their low productivity limits financial returns, particularly for women concentrated in low-wage service roles (MyJobMag, 2025).

The over representation of women in the service/trade sector reflects gender-based occupational segregation, driven by societal norms and disparities in technical skill acquisition (Aminu *et al.*, 2025). This segregation has financial implications, as women's concentration in low-productivity sectors restricts their earning potential and access to capital-intensive opportunities. Conversely, men's dominance in construction/industry, which offers higher financial returns, underscores the need for vocational training programs to equip women with skills for these sectors (ILO, 2024). Enhancing women's participation in high-value sectors could boost household incomes and contribute to Nigeria's GDP growth, projected at 3.84% in Q4 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasised the persistent gender disparities in skill acquisition and employment outcomes in Southwest Nigeria. The lower participation rates of female youth in skill acquisition programmes can be attributed to socio-cultural barriers and inadequate access to resources. The implications of these disparities were across-the-board, affecting not only individual economic outcomes but also broader societal development. This study also highlighted the critical need for targeted interventions to address gender disparities in youth skill acquisition and employment outcomes. By understanding the underlying factors that contributed to these disparities, stakeholders can develop strategies that promote gender equity and enhance economic opportunities for all youth.

Policy interventions must focus on creating inclusive skill development programmes that address the specific needs of female youths. These include promoting awareness of non-traditional career paths, providing financial support for female participants, and fostering mentorship programmes that empower young women. Future research should continue to explore the intersection of gender, skill acquisition, and employment in diverse contexts to inform policy and practice.

Recommendations

The NDHS/NBS data from 2024 reinforced persistent gender gaps in youth employment in Southwest Nigeria from early disengagement, through sectoral segregation, to limited programme outcomes. Tackling these requires coordinated interventions across policy, training systems, and cultural norms, ensuring young women are not left behind. In view of this the following recommendations were made.

1. Targeted Reduction of NEET: Address disengagement early, especially among young women, via mentoring, scholarships, and safe training environments in the Southwest.
2. Formalization Efforts: Support women's transition from informal trade to micro-enterprise with access to credit, mentorship, and legal protections.
3. Scale Digital Training: Expand initiatives like 3Million Technical Talent (3MTT) with gender-sensitive delivery; affordable, accessible, and supported by monitoring-targeted outreach.
4. Gender-Responsive Programmes: Reform national youth programmes (N-Power, Jubilee Fellows) to include gender quotas, tracking of outcomes, and female-specific benchmarks.

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