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Research Report

Research report: Labour market perceptions of young people in Sierra Leone

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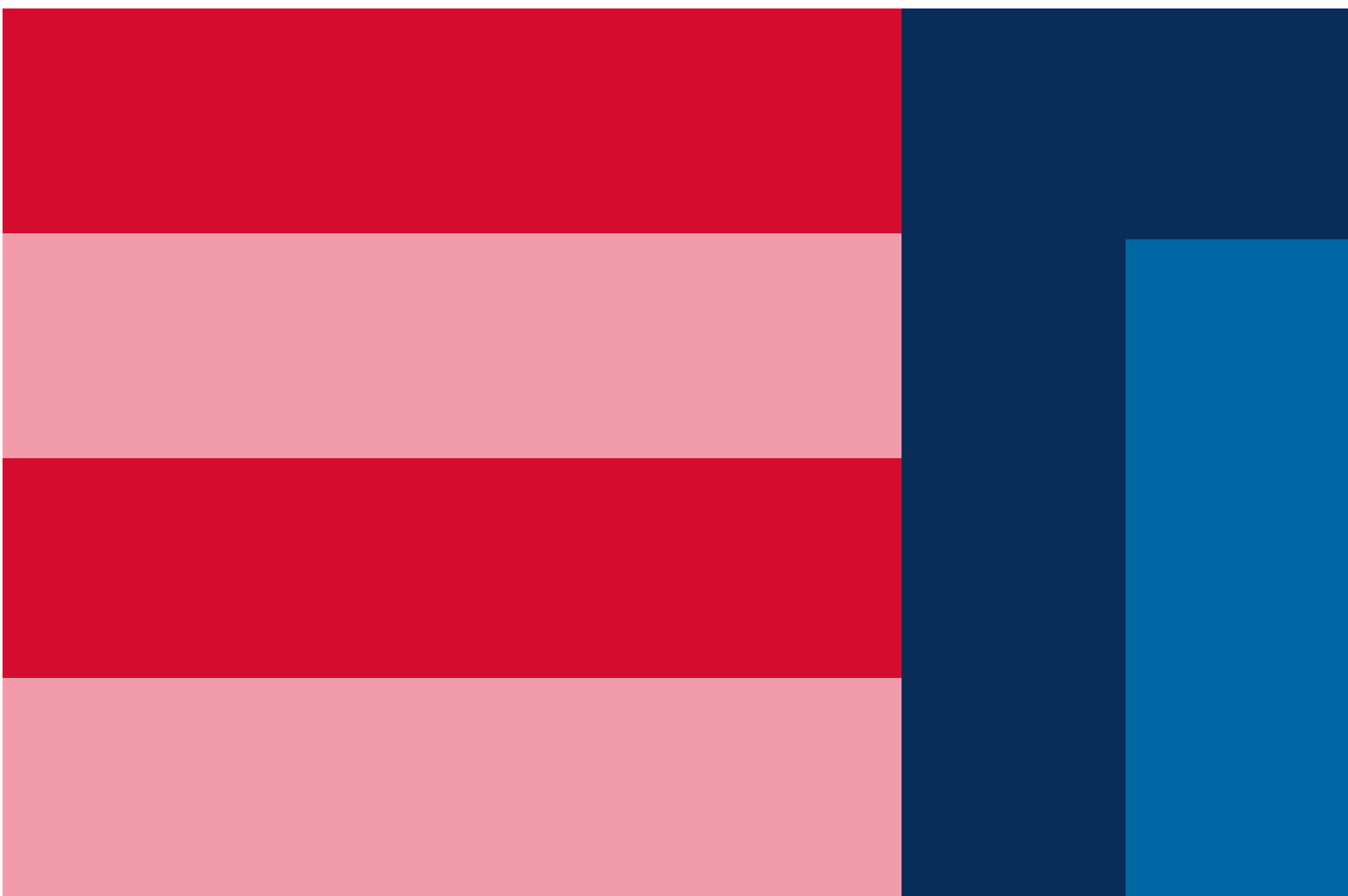
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Nr. 1-2025

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Research Report: Labour Market Perceptions of Young People in Sierra Leone

Executive Summary

This report is based on the quantitative data gathered as a part of the mixed-methods research project “Youth Labour Market Participation in Urban Sierra Leone” funded by the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung. A structured survey was administered in April 2025 in three urban centres: Freetown, Bo and Makeni to a randomly selected sample of young people aged between 18 and 35 (n = 1,502). Key findings on various aspects of labour market perceptions of young people in Sierra Leone are summarized below.

- Income:
The data show that the income level of young people is relatively low: the majority of respondents (89.0%) earn less than 3,000 Le per month and over a half earn less than 1,000 Le per month (53.4%).¹ Women tend to earn less than men. Despite this relatively low monthly income, the majority of respondents feel that their income allows them to live with dignity and independence (82.2%) and care for dependents (71.7%).
- Education:
About 45% of respondents dropped out from an educational institution. Secondary school is the most common education phase when the dropouts happen. Women are more likely to stop their education at earlier stages and less likely to complete college. Education is perceived as an important factor on the job market. At the same time, respondents express critical views on the relevance of the education they received: career coaching during education and opportunities to gain practical skills are consistently viewed as limited across all groups.
- Constraints:
Respondents report that the lack of opportunities, insufficient qualifications, corruption/nepotism and lack of work experience might significantly prevent young people from getting a job in Sierra Leone. Surprisingly, only 9.5% believe that gender might prevent young people from getting a job to a large or very large extent. At the same time women report being more affected by nearly all employment barriers, which indicates that gender still plays an important role in the labour market.
- Importance of personal connections:
An overwhelming majority of the respondents (91.2%) found their current job through personal connections or recommendations. This demonstrates the high importance of personal social networks in the job search process and indicates that highly educated young people can still struggle to find jobs because of poor networking skills or connections.
- Employment Status:
A significant proportion of respondents (75.2%) is self-employed without employees. The second largest group are paid employees (18.5%). The majority of respondents work as traders/vendors (59.9%), artisans/skilled manual labourers (13.3%) and Okada riders (7.6%). Women tend to work as traders/vendors more often than men, and men are more likely to work as skilled manual labourers and Okada riders. 84.2% of respondents confirm that they

¹ 1,000 Le is about 35 Euro; 3,000 Le is about 110 Euro (August 2025).

do not pay contributions to the National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT), primarily due to not being registered by themselves or their employers.

- Working conditions:

41.3% of workers work between 7 and 9 hours per day, while 18.4% work 10 to 12 hours per day. The majority of respondents are satisfied with their working hours and pace of their work. The opinions about work safety and health protection at work vary across the sample. Those participants who are in paid employment tend to see their work environment as more safe than self-employed respondents. Out of all professional groups traders/vendors are more likely to see their work as unsafe than other groups. Respondents tend to positively assess the atmosphere at their workplace and think that their work contributes to the success of future generations (57.9%) and to creating values for others (61.1%).

- Freedom of job choice:

Young people report relatively high levels of freedom of job choice. However, structural factors such as poverty and the economic situation in the country limit their employment opportunities significantly. More than half of respondents (53.6%) say that they need to take any job they can find and about 47% agree that they often need to take jobs that they do not enjoy in order to provide for their family. 63.5% of young people believe that the current state of the economy prevents them from having a job they want. Women are more likely to take jobs that they do not enjoy out of the necessity to provide for their family and prioritize making ends meet over their job satisfaction, which indicates unequal gender dynamics within the working population.

- Young voices:

The respondents demonstrate a high level of dissatisfaction with governmental policies and programmes for young people. At the same time, the opinions on whether voices of young people are heard during the political decision-making processes vary across the three urban centres, indicating regional differences in youth inclusion in the policy making.

1 Introduction

In recent years due to the declines in child mortality coupled with the persistently high fertility, the share of young people is rapidly growing in many regions of the world (Canning et al., 2015). Especially visible are these developments in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 70% of the population are under the age of 30 (United Nations, 2023). At the same time, we observe a rapid growth of literacy rates and school enrolment rates (World Bank, 2023). However, this growth is not accompanied with the corresponding growth of the formal labour market, which significantly limits the chances of young people to get decent jobs. The recent data show that 22% of the whole youth population in the region are not in employment, education or training (ILO, 2024). Additionally, a significant proportion of young people is underemployed (Fox and Kaul, 2018).

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world with an overall poverty rate in 2018 of 57% (Government of Sierra Leone [GoSL], 2019). The country has a very young population with the median age of 19.7 (World Bank, 2022). While adult literacy rates in Sierra Leone are only 49% (World Bank, 2022), the government makes efforts to improve the access to and the quality of education. Recent reforms such as abolition of school fees, legal guarantee of 13 years of free education, and increased investments in the education sector have led to a significant rise in school enrollment and completion rates. According to the data of the Ministry of Education, in 2021 primary school enrollment rate constituted 152%² while senior secondary school enrollment rate was 73%, which is a significant increase compared to the year 2017 when only 42% of young people were enrolled in senior secondary schools (GoSL, 2021). At the same time, the recent data show that newly achieved educational levels are not always reflected in the labour market participation. 33% of all young people in Sierra Leone are not in education, employment, or training, while the vast majority of the rest the youth population has precarious low paid jobs in informal sector and agriculture (World Bank, 2022). Some studies estimate that about 60% of young people in Sierra Leone are structurally underemployed (Alemu, 2016).

This report aims to contribute to the discussion on the youth employment in the country. It is based on the quantitative data gathered as a part of a mixed-methods research project “Youth Labour Market Participation in Urban Sierra Leone” funded by the Fritz-Thyssen Foundation.³ The report presents a diverse employment landscape in three urban centres in Sierra Leone, discusses the factors that might influence youth employment as well as demonstrates attitudes of young people towards their work and the labour market in general.

2 Methods and key demographic characteristics of participants

This report is based on the results of a structured survey conducted in three urban centres in Sierra Leone (Freetown, Bo and Makeni). The survey aimed to capture the perspectives of young people on their work experiences and document their attitudes toward urban labour markets. The questionnaire included general demographic information as well as questions related to employment status, working conditions, usefulness of their education, perceived barriers to employment and two internationally recognized scales: the Work Volition Scale (Duffy et al., 2012) and the Decent Work Scale (Ferraro et al., 2018). The survey questions were formulated with the

² This proportion of more than 100% means that students who are over-aged or under-aged relative to the official primary school-age group are enrolled to primary schools.

³ Grant number: 10.24.1.031SO

assistance of local co-researchers and administered by trained staff of the local company Nestbuilders International in April 2025.

The sample of young people aged between 18 and 35 (n = 1,502) was selected in two stages. First, 60 enumeration areas in 3 urban centres were selected with the probability proportional to size selection procedure. This selection was based on the number of households residing in the area documented in the 2015 Census Population. Then in each enumeration area 25 residents aged between 18 and 35 who are engaged in any kind of income generating activity were randomly selected. The results are presented as simple frequency counts and as cross tables. The chi-squared test is used to test the statistical significance of differences between groups in the cross tables.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for key socio-demographic characteristics

Gender	Male Female	42.8% 57.2%
Age	18 - 20 21 - 23 24 - 26 27 - 29 30 - 32 33 - 35	14.9% 15.7% 17.0% 15.6% 16.4% 20.4%
Head of household	Yes No	35.5% 64.5%
How many people live in your household?	1 – 5 6 - 10 11 - 15 16 - 20 Over 20	50.0% 44.6% 4.2% 0.7% 0.4%
What language do you speak at home? (multiple choice)	English Krio Mende Themne Other	3.8% 97.9% 26.8% 34.3% 5.7%
How would you describe your present living conditions?	Very bad Fairly bad Neither good nor bad Fairly good Very good Don't know	13.4% 18.0% 24.4% 38.6% 5.2% 0.4%
Over the last 6 months how often if ever have you or anyone in your household gone without a cash income?	Never Just once or twice Several times Many times Always	42.4% 39.4% 13.9% 2.6% 1.7%

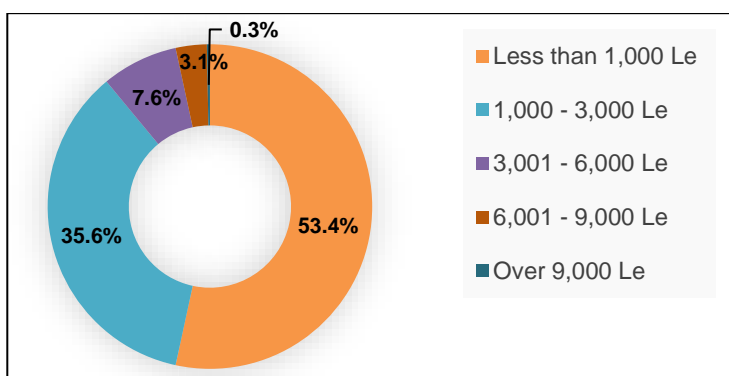
Source: own survey.

Table 1 provides summary statistics on the demographic characteristics of the sample. It shows that the absolute majority of respondents speaks Krio (97.9%) at home, either as the only language or in a combination with other local languages such as Theme or Mende. At the same time only 3.8% of respondents speak English at home.

Over a half of the respondents are not heads of their households (64.5%). However, the older respondents are, the more likely they define themselves as household heads. There is also a statistically significant difference between male and female respondents ($p < 0.01$): men are more likely to be heads of their households than women. Both trends reflect general social structures in the country (Devine et al., 2021).

The data show that the households of young people mostly have a reliable source of income: over 81% of the households have either never gone without cash income over the last 6 months or just once or twice. At the same time, the income of young people themselves remains relatively low. As figure 1 shows the majority of respondents earn less than 3,000 Le per month and over a half of the respondents earn less than 1,000 Le per month (53.4%). Only 3.4% earn more than 6,000 Le per month⁴.

Figure 1: Distribution of monthly income per household



Source: own survey.

Women tend to earn less than men: while 59.6% of women reported a monthly income of less than 1,000 Le, for men this proportion is only 45.1%. The differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Despite this relatively low monthly income, the majority of respondents feel that their income allows them to live with dignity and independence (82.2%) and to care for dependents (71.7%). A slightly lower proportion thinks that their earnings are fair (53.7%). No statistically significant differences between men and women were identified, which shows that both genders tend to perceive their earnings similarly.

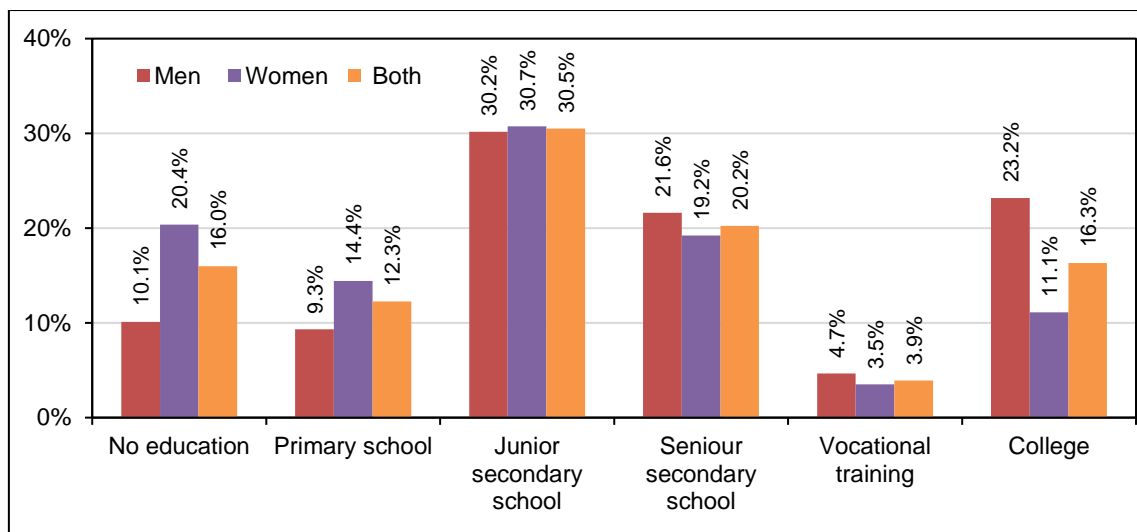
The data show that most young people have a good control over the money they earn: 66.1% report that they make decisions about how to use their earnings themselves, while 27.9% make decisions jointly with their spouses or other family members.

⁴ 1,000 Le is about 35 euro; 3,000 Le is about 110 euro (August 2025).

3 Educational level and attitudes towards relevance and usefulness of received education

The highest level of completed education varies across the sample (see figure 2). Disaggregation of the data by gender shows that women are more likely to stop their education at earlier stages and less likely to complete college. 20.4% of female respondents do not have any educational certificates, while for male participants this proportion is only 10.1%. In contrast, 23.2% of male respondents completed college, but for females this proportion is only 11.1%.

Figure 2: Highest level of completed education by gender



Source: own survey.

The data show that dropouts from educational institutions are also common: 44.8% of respondents reported that they dropped out. Senior secondary school is the most common education phase when the dropouts happen (54.1%). The most common reason for school dropouts is financial struggles (79.9%) followed by family issues (31.8%) and pregnancy (22.6%).

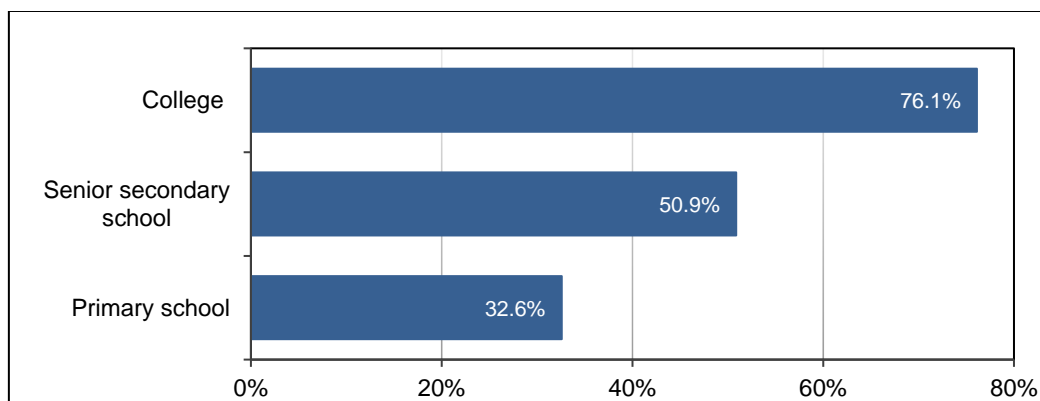
There is a strong belief that corruption and nepotism prevent young people from getting a good education. About 62% of respondents either agree or strongly agree with this statement. The perceived importance of this barrier to education is high regardless of gender and education level.

Education is perceived as an important factor on the job market. At the same time, respondents express critical views on the relevance of the education they received. While 60.5% either agree or strongly agree that their education prepared them for the national labour market, slightly less than half (48.8%) believe that their education reflected the everyday realities of Sierra Leone and only 36.8% report receiving enough practical skill training. Additionally, just about 30.9% think that they had adequate career coaching during their education.

Interestingly, women tend to see their education more critically than men: women report higher disagreement with the statement that their education reflects local realities ($p < 0.01$) and tend to express dissatisfaction with how education prepared them for the labour market ($p < 0.01$). Disaggregation by educational level also shows statistically significant differences between

groups ($p < 0.01$). College graduates tend to see the relevance and usefulness of their education more positively than those who completed primary or secondary school only (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Proportion of young people who agree or strongly agree that their education reflected local realities by highest level of completed education



Source: own survey.

However, there are no statistically significant differences in perceptions of career coaching and opportunities to gain practical skills: both are consistently viewed as limited across all groups. These findings may reflect systemic shortcomings of the educational system, indicating the lack of career guidance and an emphasis on theoretical learning.

4 Factors influencing job search

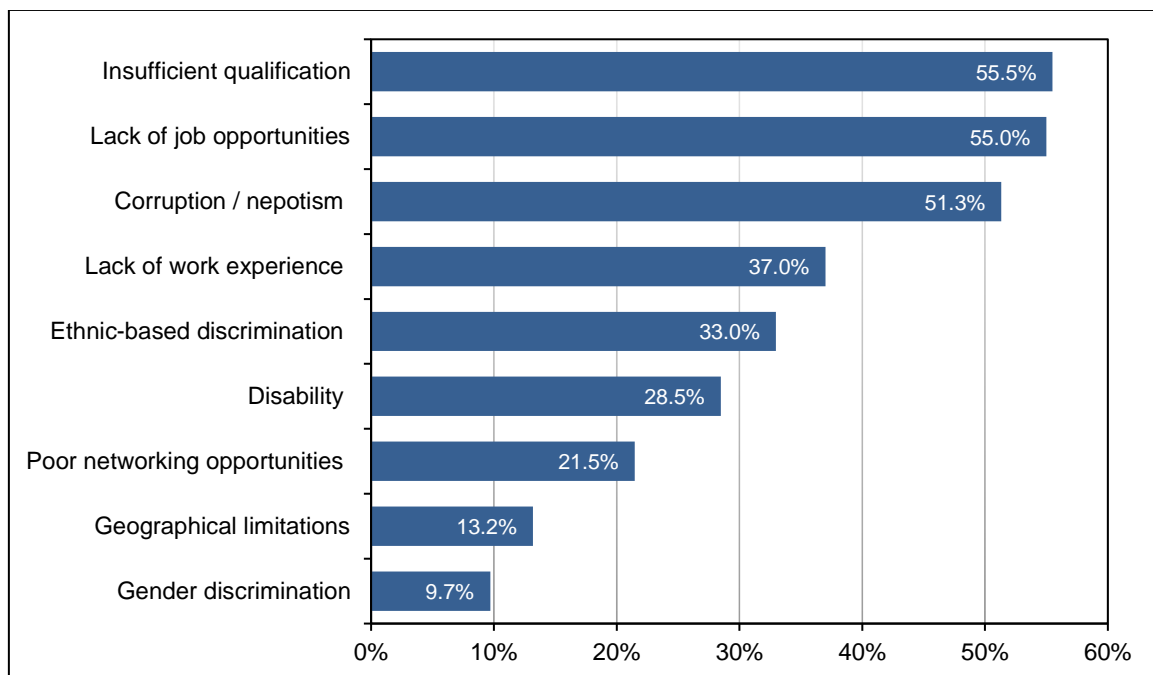
An overwhelming majority of the respondents (91.2%) found their current job through personal connections or recommendations. This highlights the significant role that personal social networks play in the job search process and suggests that even highly educated young people may struggle to find employment due to weak networking skills or a lack of connections.

The data show that young people face several structural barriers during the job search process: a significant number of respondents believes that insufficient qualifications (55.5%), lack of opportunities (55.0%) and the lack of work experience (37.3%) might prevent young people from getting a job to a large or very large extent (see figure 4).

The data also show that more educated respondents tend to name 'lack of opportunity' as their biggest challenge more often than other groups ($p < 0.05$). This might reflect the scarcity of white-collar jobs and/or higher expectations of college graduates. These findings also show that education does not always eliminate perceived barriers to employment.

There are also statistically significant differences between residents of different urban centres ($p < 0.01$): while respondents from all three cities view lack of opportunities and insufficient qualifications as the biggest challenges they face during the job search, young people from Freetown tend to define 'lack of opportunities' as their biggest challenge (46.1%) more often than youth from Bo and Makeni (22.9% and 39.4% respectively). This may be an indication of a labour market glut in Freetown.

Figure 4: To what extent might the following factors prevent you from getting a job that you wish? A proportion of young people who answered ‘to large extent’ or ‘to very large extent’

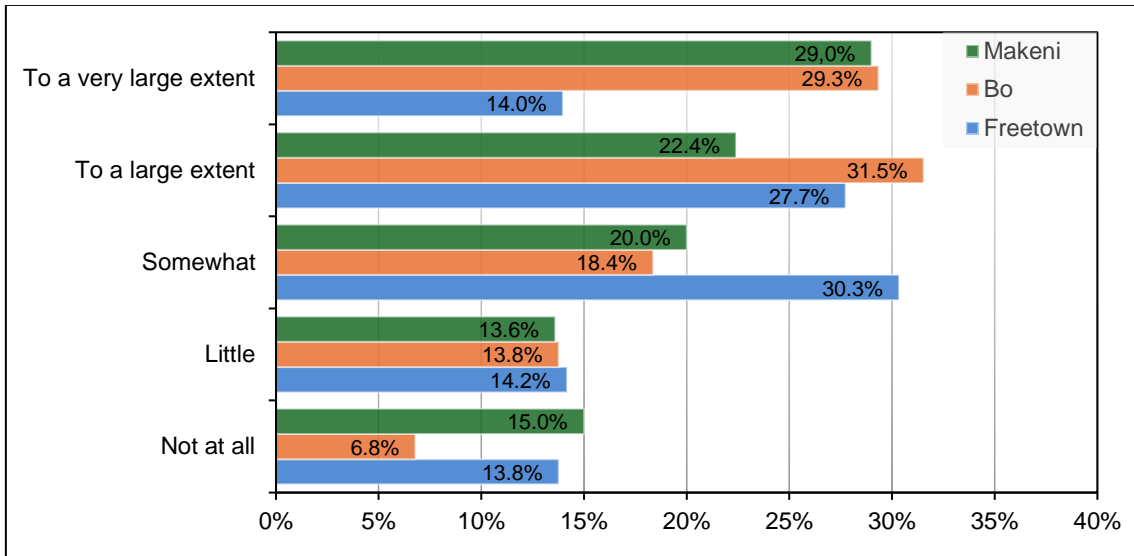


Source: own survey.

Corruption and nepotism are seen as another important barrier to employment. 51.3% of the respondents believe that corruption/nepotism might prevent employment ‘to a large’ or ‘very large extent’. There are no statistically significant differences across different groups, which allows us to conclude that corruption and nepotism are endemic structural problems that affect a significant number of young people regardless of their qualifications or gender.

At the same time there are statistically significant differences between the urban centres in this regard ($p < 0.01$): respondents from Bo tend to see corruption/nepotism as a more pressing problem than young people from Freetown and Makeni (see figure 5). Additionally, while asked about the biggest challenge for job search 23.0% of respondents from Bo chose ‘corruption/nepotism’, while in Freetown and Makeni this proportion is 8.4% and 14.0% respectively. This might either indicate a higher prevalence of corruption and nepotism in the Bo region or, in contrast, indicate a higher awareness among young people in Bo compared to youth in other regions.

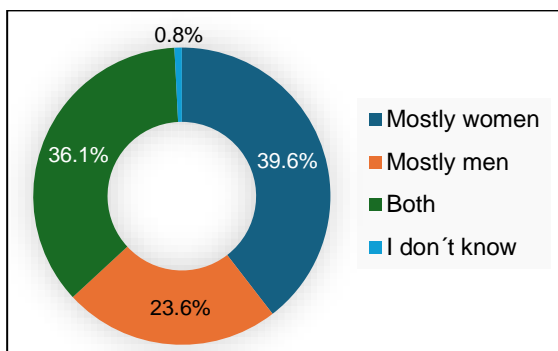
Figure 5: To what extent might corruption/nepotism prevent you from getting a job that you wish to have by city



Source: own survey.

Interestingly, gender and ethnic discrimination as well as disability seem to have limited impact on young people’s success in the job search. Only 28.5% of respondents believe that disability might impact employment chances significantly. For ethnic discrimination this proportion is about 33.0%. The impact of gender discrimination is perceived to be even lower: only 9.5% believe that it might prevent young people from getting a job to a large or very large extent. This may indicate either progress in gender equity or underreporting due to normalization of gender bias. Additionally, this might be an indication that gender discrimination does not directly affect the job search process itself but rather frames what jobs are available and what working conditions are acceptable for women. The hypothesis that gender dynamics still play an important role in the job search is supported by the result of the data disaggregation by gender: it shows that across nearly all factors, women report statistically significant higher barriers than men.

Figure 6: Who do you think has better chances to get a decent/ good job?

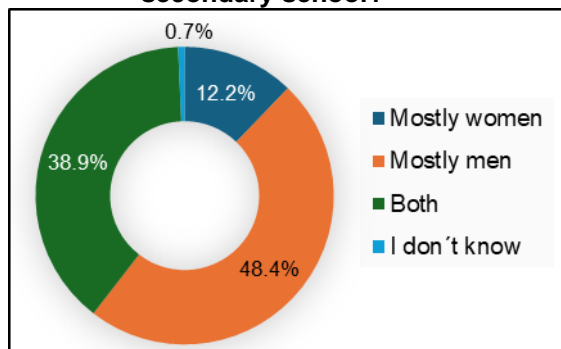


Source: own survey.

At the same time, the data on the perceived impact of gender on school completion, fair payment and getting a decent job indicates some degree of gender parity (see figure 6). While 39.6% believe that women have better chances to get a decent/good job, 36.1% think that men and women have equal chances.

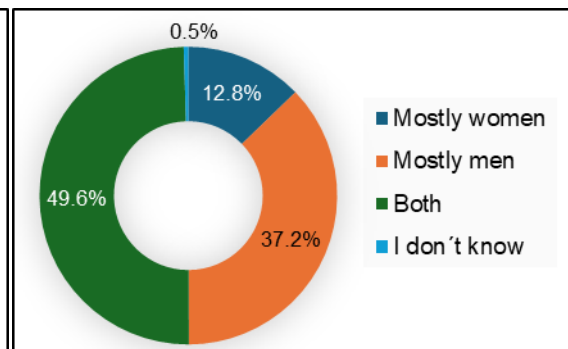
Similar trends are seen in the answers about gender impact on fair payment: 38.6% believe that both men and women have equal chances to receive fair payment.

Figure 7: Who do you think has better chances to complete secondary school?



Source: own survey.

Figure 8: Who do you think has better chances to complete college?



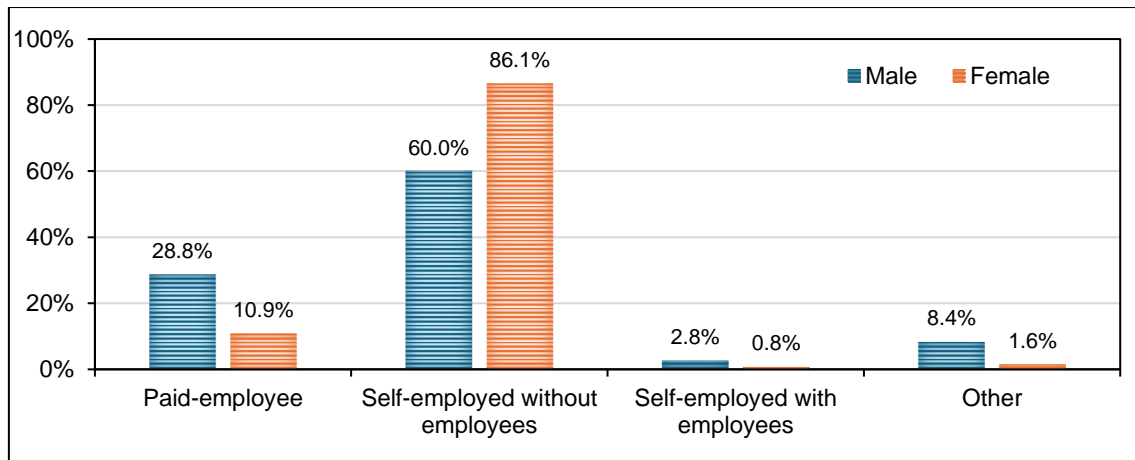
Source: own survey.

However, in answers about chances in completing education we observe a slightly different trend (see figures 7 and 8): while a significant proportion of respondents still believes that both men and women have equally good chances to complete secondary school (38.7%) and college (49.5%), the proportion of those who think that men have better chances is equally high (48.4% and 37.2% for secondary school and college respectively). In contrast only about 12% believe that women have better chances to succeed in their education. This may indicate hidden gender patterns that lead to lower expectations towards female students (see Samonova, Devine, 2023).

5 Employment Status

The majority of the respondents (75.2%) is self-employed without employees, which clearly shows the dominance of self-employment among young people. The second largest group is paid employees (18.5%). In contrast, the proportion of self-employed with employees is notably small (1.6%). The data show a statistically significant gender disparity in employment status: male respondents are more likely to work as paid employees, while female respondents are mostly self-employed ($p < 0.01$). A high proportion of respondents (65.5%) is looking for another job, which suggests that the current employment is perceived as unsatisfactory by many young people.

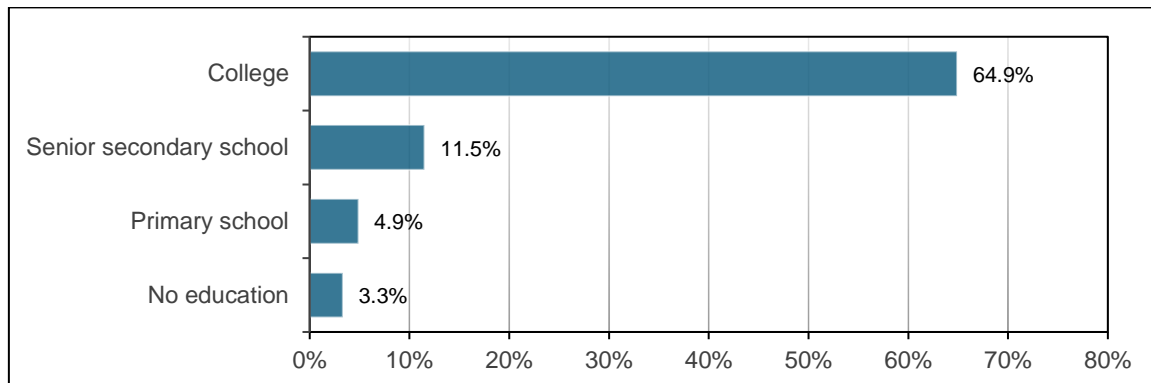
Figure 9: Employment status by gender



Source: own survey.

The disaggregation of the data by educational level shows that respondents with college degree are more likely to work as paid employees than those without a degree ($p < 0.01$): about 65% of all college graduates in the sample are in paid employment, while for the respondents with senior secondary school diploma this proportion is only 11.5% (see figure 10).

Figure 10: Young people in paid employment by the highest level of completed education

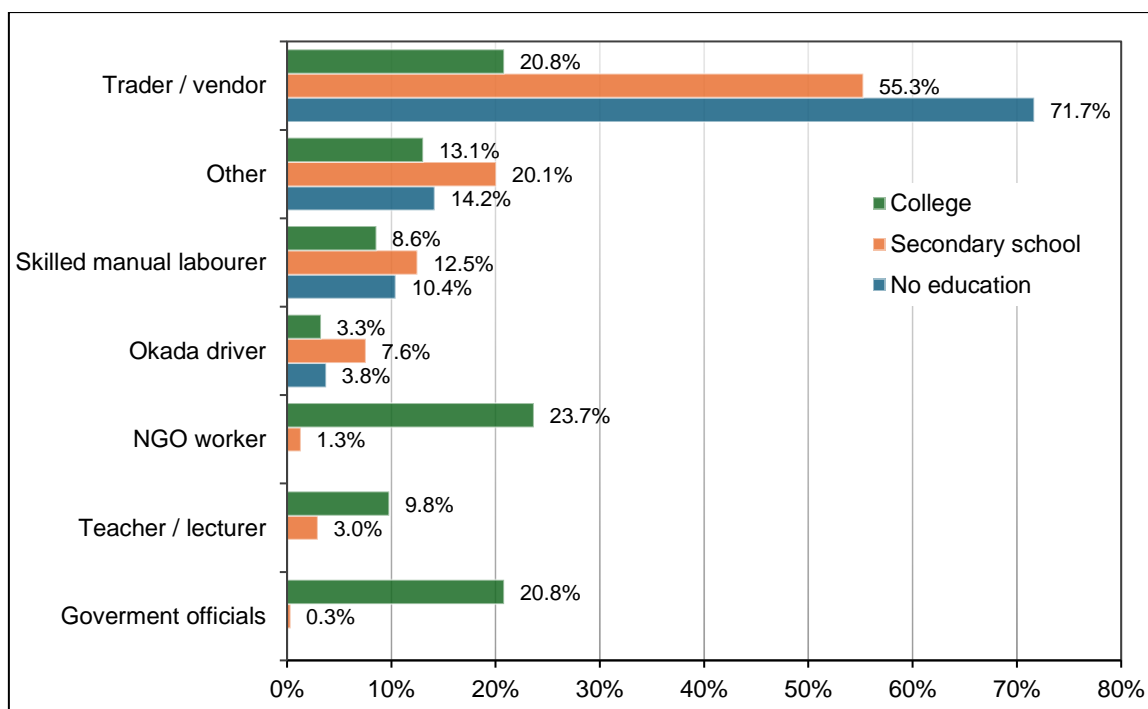


Source: own survey.

The data also demonstrate statistically significant regional differences: young people from Bo City are more likely to work in paid employment than youth in Freetown and Makeni ($p < 0.01$).

The majority of respondents work as traders/vendors (59.9%), artisans/skilled manual labourers (13.3%) and Okada riders (7.6%). Unsurprisingly, there is a statistically significant difference between professions of college graduates and young people with lower levels of education ($p < 0.01$). Young people with college degrees are more likely to work as government officials, teachers and NGO workers than other groups. However, college graduates also work as vendors/trades (20.8%), skilled manual labourers (8.5%) and Okada riders (3.8%), which may indicate the inelastic nature of the labour market that cannot absorb all college graduates (see figure 11).

Figure 11: What do you do for living by highest level of completed education



Source: own survey.

The disaggregation of data by gender shows statistically significant differences: women tend to work as traders/vendors more often than men (77.9 % of women in the sample work as traders/vendors compared to 26.3 % of men), while men are more likely to work as skilled manual labourers and Okada riders ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore, respondents from Freetown are more likely to work as traders/vendors and Okada riders, while in Bo and Makeni there is a higher proportion of young people working as skilled labourers ($p < 0.01$). These trends may reflect differences in local labour markets.

84.2% of respondents confirm that they do not pay contributions to the National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT), primarily due to not being registered by themselves or their employers. This raises concerns about social security within the course of employment. At the same time, it should be noted that the informal sector has only recently been included in social

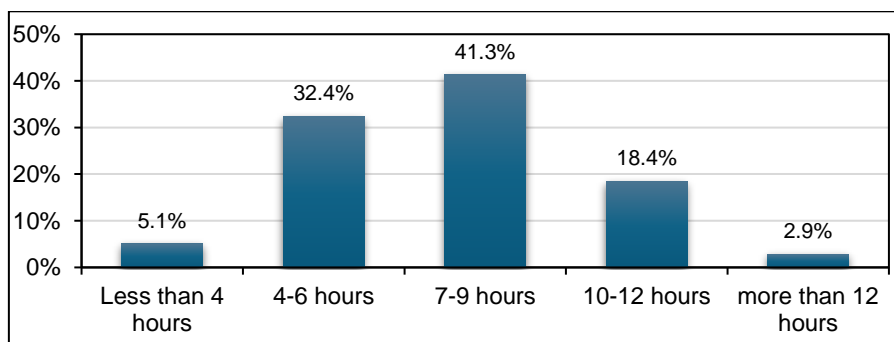
security schemes and several reforms – such as a pension scheme for informal workers – are still on going. This suggests that the situation may improve in the coming years.

There are statistically significant differences between men and women in regard to NASSIT contributions: men are more likely to pay contributions compared to women ($p < 0.01$), which indicates that men are more often employed in a formal sector, where paying social security contributions is more widespread. The low rate of participation in social security programmes is also reflected in attitudes and expectations towards social protection in general. The majority of participants do not feel that they are protected if they become unemployed (70.0%) or ill (72.1%). 69.1% do not believe that they will have a retirement without financial worries. The data show that those who are in paid employment tend to have more positive views on social protection ($p < 0.05$), which can be explained by their higher rate of participation in government or private social security schemes.

6 Working conditions

Most of the interviewed workers work between 7 and 9 hours per day (41.3%), while 18.4% work 10 to 12 hours per day (figure 12). The majority of respondents are satisfied with their working hours and pace of their work: 69.2% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that their number of working hours is adequate and 67.5% believe that their work allows them to have time for family and personal life. The majority of participants either have a travel time of less than 30 minutes (54.1%) or work at home (19.4%). Women tend to work at home more often than men ($p < 0.01$).

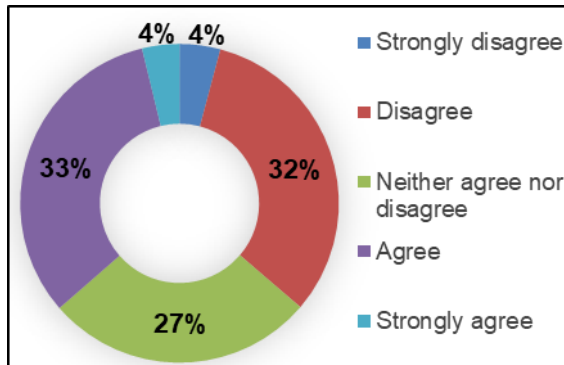
Figure 12: How many hours per day do you work in total?



Source: own survey.

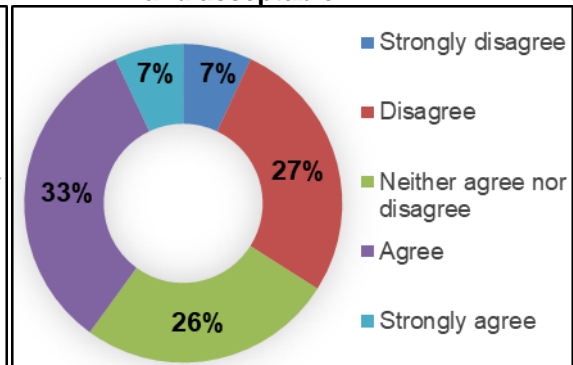
The opinions about the work safety and health protection at work vary across the sample (see figure 13): while 36.6% disagree or strongly disagree that they are protected from dangers to physical health at work, another 36.4% agree or strongly agree with this statement and 27.3% remain neutral. Similar patterns can be seen in the overall perceptions of the working environment: while about 34.0% do not agree that their working environment is safe, 40.1% agree with this statement (see figure 14).

Figure 13: At my work I am protected from dangers to physical health



Source: own survey.

Figure 14: Overall, the environmental conditions in my work are safe and acceptable



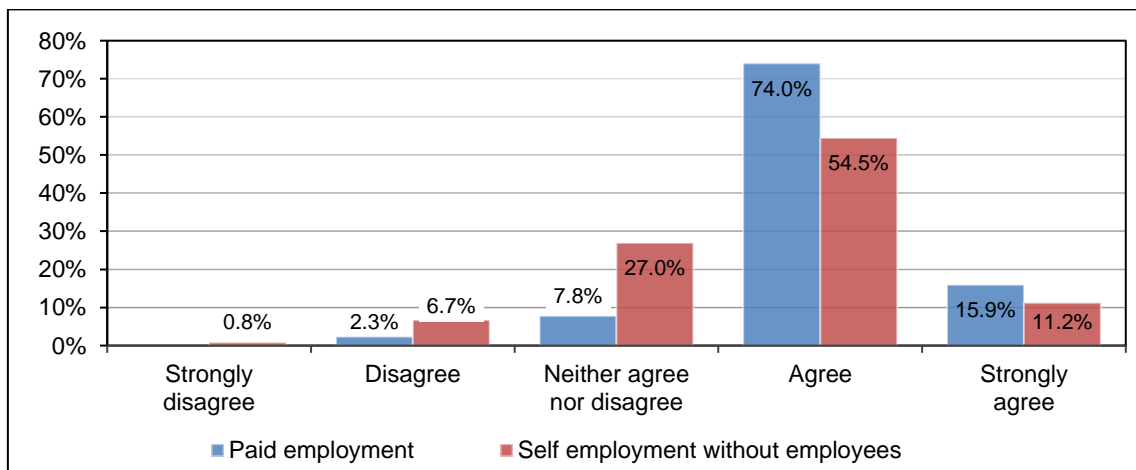
Source: own survey.

Those participants who work as paid employees tend to see their work environment as more safe than self-employed respondents ($p < 0.01$). Out of all professional groups traders/vendors are more likely to see their work as unsafe than other groups ($p < 0.01$), which probably could be explained by the nature of their work that often takes place outside under the rain and sun.

Respondents tend to positively assess the atmosphere at their workplace: 59.6% believe that there is trust among people at their work and 87.8% report that at their work they are treated with dignity. A slightly lower proportion think that at their work everyone can participate fairly in making decisions (47.3%). Respondents also view their work positively in regard to their well-being and professional fulfilment: 58.9% agree that their work allows them to live with a personal feeling of well-being and 61.1% think that their work contributes to their personal and professional fulfilment. Overall, 69.5% describe their work as decent.

Many respondents also think that their work contributes to the success of future generations (57.9%) and creates values for others (61.3%). While these positive views are widespread across all groups, respondents in paid employment tend to give more positive answers about their work than their self-employed counterparts (figure 15).

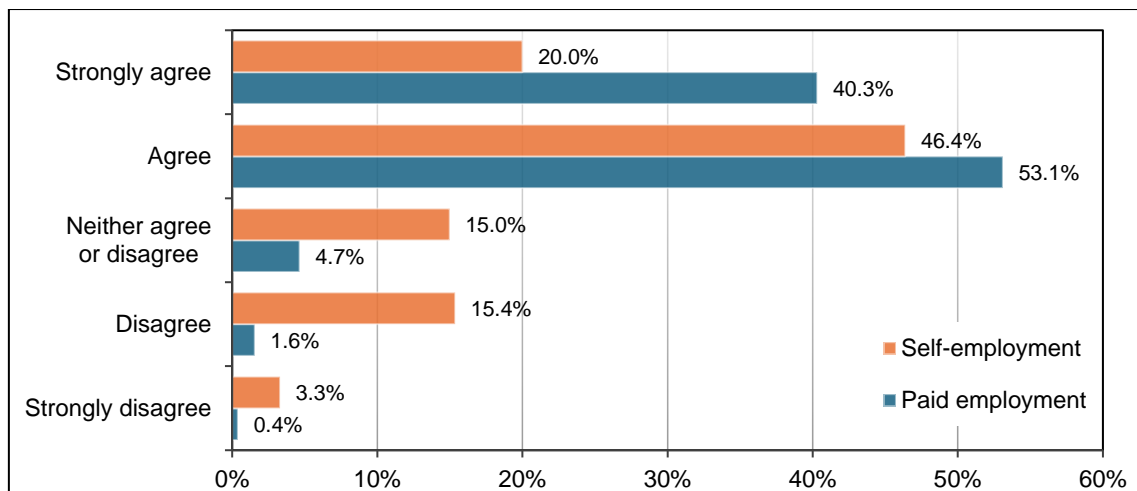
Figure 15: I consider the work I do to be decent



Source: own survey.

Perceptions of opportunities at the workplace are also mostly positive: 72.4% believe that through their work they can develop themselves professionally and 59.6% see prospects for improving their wage/salary. Additionally, 64.3% believe that they have opportunities to advance professionally. However, these answers show a statistically significant correlation between employment status and perceived opportunities: as in the case of the attitudes towards health protection at work, respondents in paid employment tend to be more positive towards their professional opportunities than self-employed respondents (see figure 16). Disaggregation by gender shows that men tend to be more optimistic about their opportunities than women.

Figure 16: Through my work I can develop myself professionally

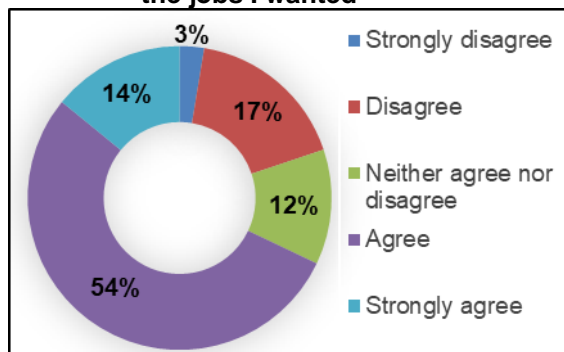


Source: own survey.

7 Work Volition

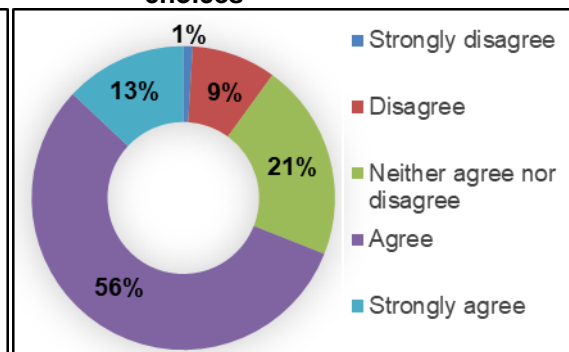
Work volition is defined as the perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints (Duffy et al., 2021). Young people report relatively high levels of freedom of job choice: about 68% either agree or strongly agree that they are able to choose the jobs that they want and about 69% feel total control over their job choices.

Figure 17: I've been able to choose the jobs I wanted



Source: own survey.

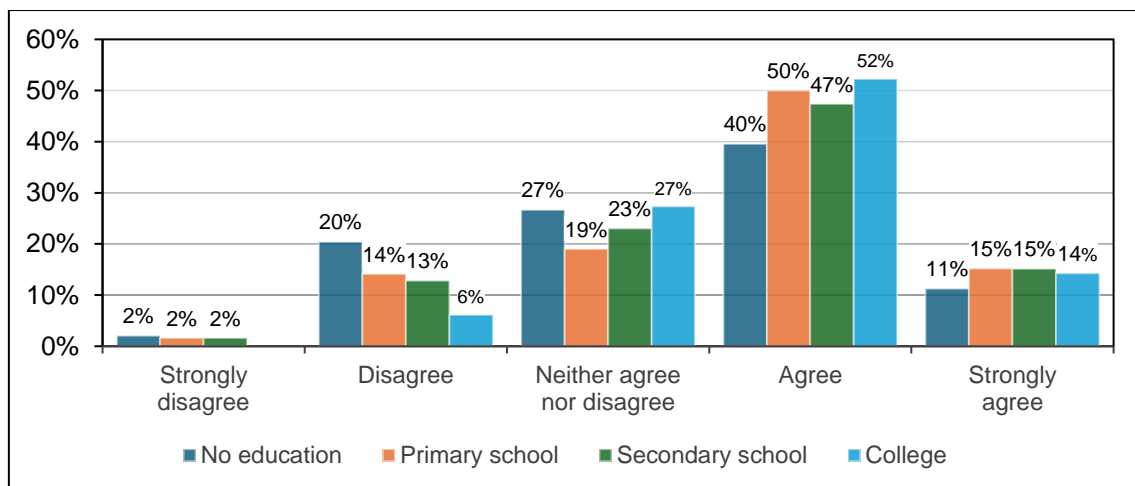
Figure 18: I feel total control over my job choices



Source: own survey.

Additionally, 68.6% report that they learnt how to find their way through the world of work. The disaggregation of data suggests that education may play a role in the perceived work volition: respondents with college degrees report more freedom in job choice, and higher self-reliance in navigating the job market. For example, among college graduates 66.5% feel able to change jobs if they want to, while for young people with no educational certificates this proportion is 50.8% ($p < 0.01$).

Figure 19: I feel able to change jobs if I want to by the highest level of completed education

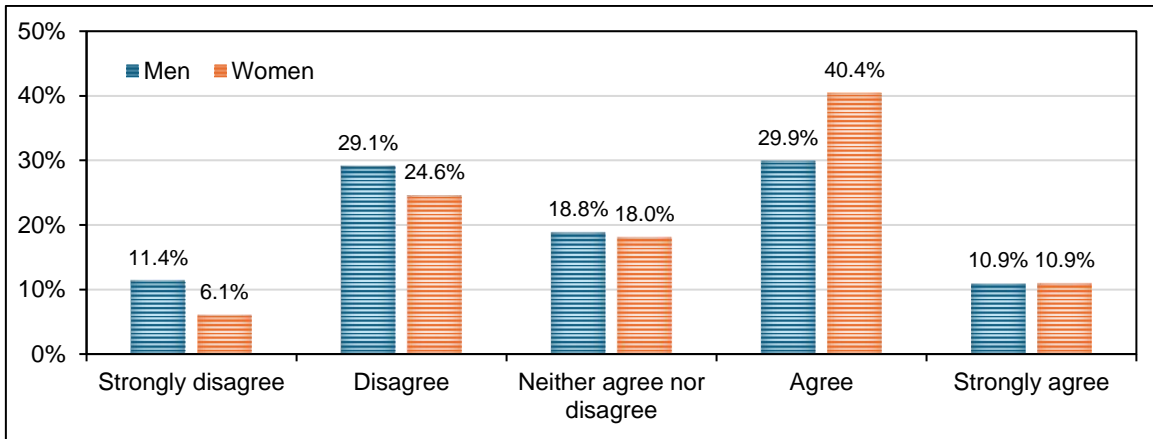


Source: own survey.

While a significant proportion of young people reports relatively high work volition, the role of financial and structural constraints in work choices should not be underestimated: more than half of the respondents say that they need to take any job that they can find (53.6%) and about 46.5% agree that they often need to take jobs that they do not enjoy in order to provide for their family.

Another 46.8% agree that they prioritize making ends meet over job satisfaction (see figure 20). At the same time, there are several statistically significant differences across the groups: women are more likely to take jobs that they do not enjoy out of the necessity to provide for their family ($p < 0.01$) and tend to prioritize making ends meet over their own job satisfaction ($p < 0.01$), which once again indicates unequal gender dynamics within the working population.

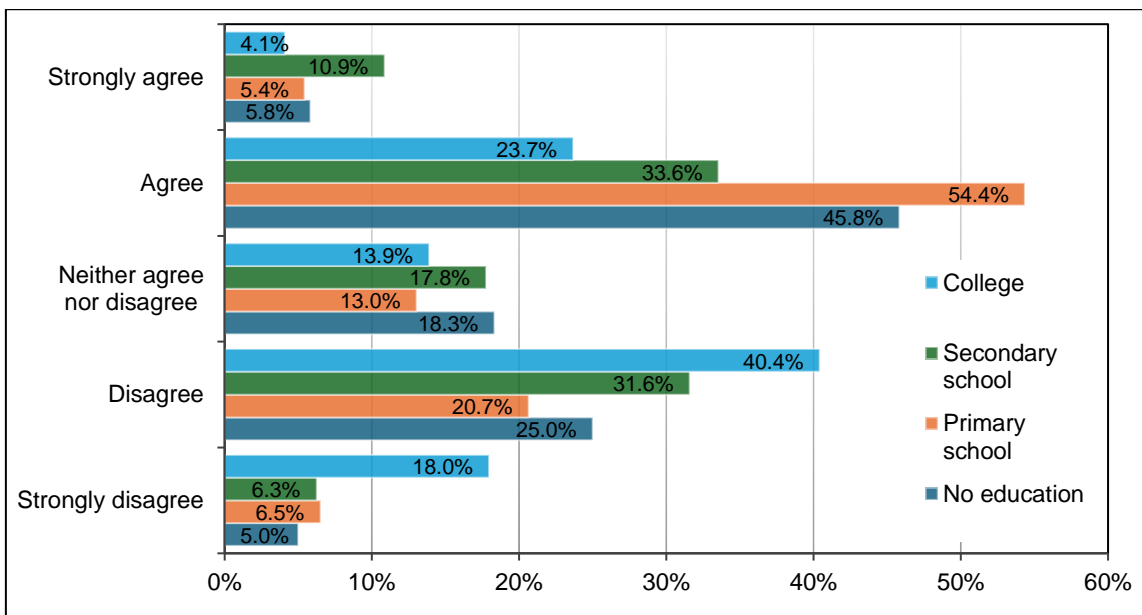
Figure 20: The only thing that matters to me in choosing a job is making ends meet



Source: own survey.

College graduates, in turn, consistently report lower readiness to accept any available job and higher prioritization of job satisfaction (figure 21). This might indicate that college education is associated with higher expectations of graduates and/or better remuneration.

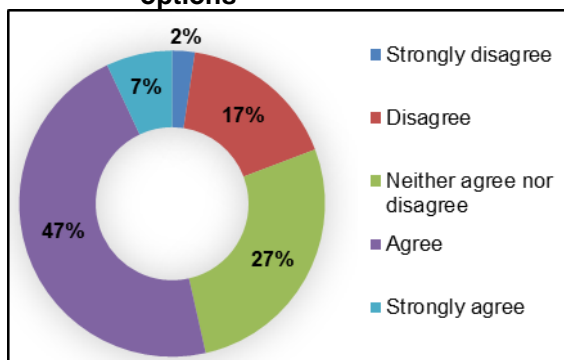
Figure 21: In order to provide for my family, I often need to take jobs that I don't enjoy



Source: own survey.

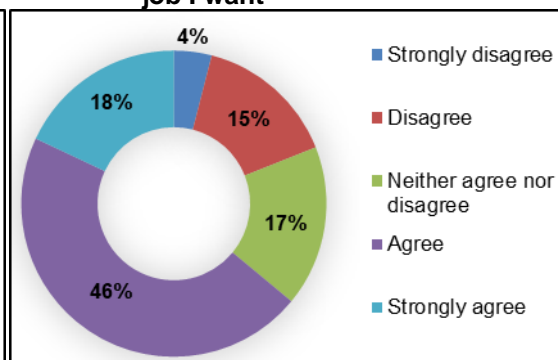
Structural forces such as poverty and the economic situation in the country are also perceived as important factors that limit work volition of young people. 48.1% report that negative factors outside their control had a large impact on their current career choices. Slightly more than half (53.5%) feel that outside forces have really limited their work and career options and 63.5% of young people believe that the current state of the economy prevents them from working in the work they want. (figures 22 and 23).

Figure 22: I feel that outside forces have limited my work and career options



Source: own survey.

Figure 23: The current state of the economy prevents me from working in the job I want



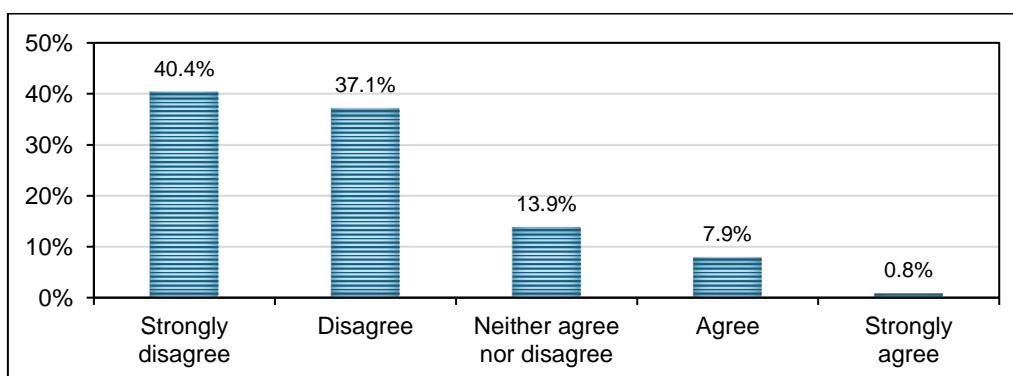
Source: own survey.

Structural factors seem to have less influence on career choices of college graduates, however even in this group about a third of respondents consistently report negative impacts of outside forces on their career choices.

8 Youth Voices and Political Participation

The data show a high level of dissatisfaction among the respondents with the government policies and programmes for young people: only 8.7% believe the government effectively addresses youth needs, while about 77.5% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement (see figure 24). These results are consistent across all groups of respondents.

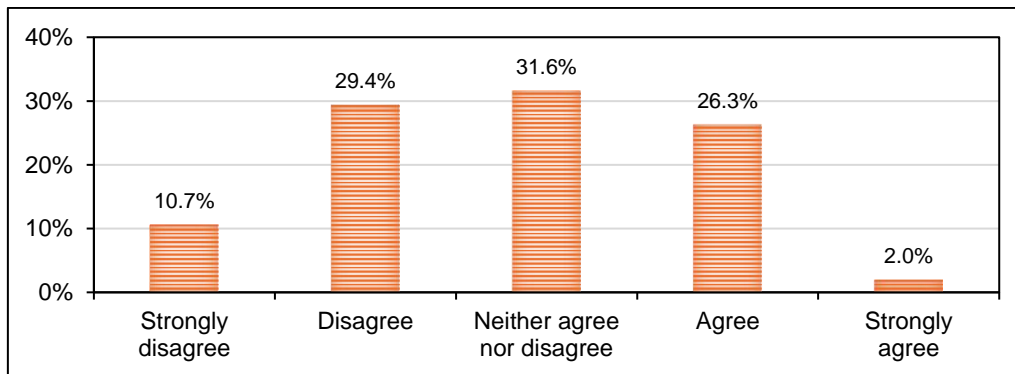
Figure 24: The government effectively addresses the needs of young people



Source: own survey.

The opinions on whether young people feel themselves listened to in the country vary: about 40% do not agree with this statement, however, about 28% support it, while 31.6% are neutral (see figure 25).

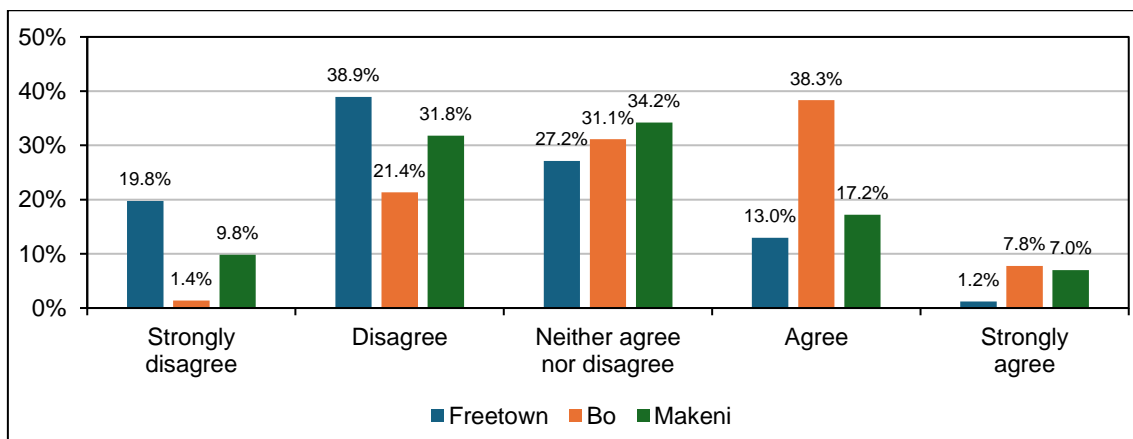
Figure 25: Young people feel listened to in the community / country



Source: own survey.

Interestingly, there is a statistically significant difference between young people from different urban centres: youth from Bo city tend to have more positive views on their ability to influence political decision-making processes than their counterparts in Freetown and Makeni ($p < 0.01$). Similar trends can be found in young people's perceptions on whether their ideas are used to change things in communities (see figure 26): 46.1% of young people from Bo agree or strongly agree with this statement, while in Freetown (14.2%) and Makeni (24.2%) this proportion is significantly lower.

Figure 26: Ideas of young people are used to change things in the community



Source: own survey.

These trends may indicate differences at local policy level: it seems that Bo city provides more opportunities for youth political and social participation.

9 Summary

This report summarises the main findings of the structured survey conducted in April 2025. The survey was an integral part of the mixed-methods study “Labour Market Participation of Young people in Urban Sierra Leone” and aimed to capture attitudes of young people towards the labour market in general and their work in particular as well as to examine main trends in urban youth employment.

The report demonstrates existing structural problems of urban labour markets in Sierra Leone: lack of available jobs, low qualifications of young people, low social security coverage as well as widespread corruption and nepotism along with the high importance of social networks and personal contacts in the job search process. The data show that self-employment without employees is the prevalent form of employment among young people in the research area. The absolute majority of respondents are not covered by existing social security schemes. The opinions about safety of the workplace varies with self-employed respondents reporting lowest levels of satisfaction with health protection at work. At the same time, most young people tend to see their work as decent and believe that it allows them to reach personal well-being and professional fulfilment.

Education seems to play an important role in the youth labour market participation. Respondents with college degrees consistently reported higher income, better inclusion in the social security schemes and higher job satisfaction. However, the data also indicate the inelastic nature of the labour market that cannot absorb all college graduates. While college graduates are more likely to work as paid employees in the formal sector, there is still a significant proportion of self-employed graduates who work as vendors/traders, manual labourers and Okada riders. Moreover, the respondents express critical views towards relevance and practical applicability of their education, indicating such systemic shortcomings of the educational system as the lack of career guidance and the emphasis on theoretical learning.

The data also demonstrate that gender dynamics play a significant role in youth employment and career trajectories. While only a minority of respondents see gender discrimination as a serious employment barrier, women consistently report being more affected by nearly all structural employment barriers than men. Moreover, the data show that women tend to have lower income and qualifications and demonstrate higher willingness to prioritize the needs of their family over their career. These trends indicate deeply rooted gender norms and stereotypes that are widespread in the society and limit women’s ability to realize their full potential on the labour market.

The findings of this survey demonstrate the need of structural reforms and youth-informed interventions that would counteract unfavourable economic conditions, extend existing social protection, challenge existing gender norms, improve practical relevance of education, and support the creation of new jobs, especially in the formal sector.

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