



## A Gender Analysis of Youths' Aspirations and Resilience in the COVID-19 era in Nigeria

Mary Thamari<sup>1</sup>, Babatunde Ojebuyi<sup>2</sup>, Daniel Doh<sup>3</sup>, and Martin Atela<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Independent Consultant, UK/Kenya

<sup>2</sup>University of Ibadan, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>University of Western Australia

<sup>4</sup>Independent Consultant, Kenya

---

### ABSTRACT

*This article examined young men and women's expressions of life aspirations and resilience strategies during covid-era. It further explored how gendering norms and practices of masculinity and femininity play a role in their definitions of success and resilience as they face constraints and opportunities presented by covid-19. The study utilized mixed method research comprising a cross sectional survey and ethnographic methods among 1659 Nigerian youth aged 15 years and to 35 years. The study highlighted the mutually reinforcing influences of a social disruption on youth's self-understanding and normative gendered practices. Definitions of what constitutes success during a socially disruptive pandemic era and how young people frame aspirations provide a lens to understanding resilience. This study sheds light to how the youths' experiences of gendering norms of masculinity and femininity create differentiated conditions on one hand and shape resilience on the other. Based on the findings, this article recommends a consideration of multiple adaptive systems for youth resilience in advocacy and programmatic interventions following disruptive conditions. Policies, programmes, and youth-centric structures aimed at strengthening resilience should factor internal and external factors which promote or hinder resilience such as social networks and gendered social norms.*

**Keywords:** Gender Analysis, COVID-19 Pandemic, Aspirations strategies, Resilience strategies.

---

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Social disruptions and a state of checkered fortunes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and enduring youth unemployment continue to shape young men and young women's aspirations and resilience strategies globally. Young men and men and women in the continent have been projected to face long-term negative impacts of the pandemic (United Nations Development Programme 2021), especially regarding their aspirations for future life. In these conditions, young people frame what they aspire to as 'a good life' in diverse ways. An array of resilience strategies are employed to buffer the effects of the covid-19 pandemic and cope with the unstable socio-economic conditions. Studies have identified factors that promote resilience (Masten and Cicchetti 2016). Some of the processes or pathways to resilience, such as spirituality and personal endurance (Chee, 2019) as well as social networks, and social cohesion (Michael Ungar et al. 2019) are identified. Being the largest black nation in the world, with the youth taking over 70% of its population (Simona 2020; World Population Review 2022), Nigeria provides a perfect context for projecting young people's resilience and varying voices regarding their aspirations. Among Nigerian young men and young women, varying forms of resilience pathways based on gender and other intersecting conditions of privilege or disadvantage were explicit in this current study.

Resilience is defined with a range of terms such as 'bouncing back', 'adapting', 'recovering', 'sustaining stability', and 'adjusting well' (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Bonnano, 2008; Leipold & Greve, 2009; Ong et al., 2006). Others have referred to it as 'an ordinary occurrence' (Bonnano, 2008; Kelley, 2005). emphasising that resilience is a "natural human capacity." Bonanno argues that pathways that produce resilience come from multiple sources and are

shaped by many factors (Bonnano, 2008). In any adversity or life-disrupting event, such as covid-19 pandemic, there are protective factors and risk factors that shape people's resilience. These factors can range from political, economic, environmental, and personal attributes to social-cultural and contextual experiences. One of the essential human social characteristics, gender and gender norms have been found to influence resilience (Blatt-Eisengart, 2009; Bonnano, 2008; Galambos et al., 2006; Hankin et al., 1998; Bezek, 2010; Vinayak & Judge, 2018). As a multi-dimensional concept, resilience "displays both homogeneity and heterogeneity across culturally diverse research settings." (M. Ungar, 2006. 219) This current study demonstrates how these mutually reinforcing multiple factors play out among young people in Nigeria during the covid-era.

Aspirations have been understood as 'social grounding of individual desires' (Debraj R., 2006). According to Debraj, aspirations are formed based on what is in view in a social setting such as the ideals of what is acceptable or considered good by people around an individual. Individual aspirations may therefore be limited to the social networks around them. Further framing of the concept of aspiration posits that aspiration is cyclically linked with poverty. Appadurai, argues that poverty conditions can alter aspirations and failure to achieve the aspiration may cause poverty. Both Appadurai and Debraj views on aspiration provide a lens to analyse how social capital linkages and conditions of covid-19 pandemic intersect to influence youth aspirations. Other research in a similar context as Nigeria has revealed the mutually reinforcing influences of gender aspirations such as desire to attain some level of acceptable femininity, and poverty (Thamari, 2021).

Additionally, social connections, norms, and trust between individuals, social capital plays an important role in helping people achieve shared goals (Putnam 1993; Putman 1995), social capital is central to young men and women's resilience. From the sentiments of young women and men, resilience springs up from social capital seen in social-cultural systems such as norms, relationships with close family and peers, and networks with others within their setting. Bonding and bridging social capital linkages had a significant role in the adaptive systems of young people.

### **1.1 Methodology**

The study from which this paper is based was designed as a mixed method research incorporating a cross sectional survey and ethnographic methods. The survey sample was done using a combination of cluster and systematic sampling approaches. Data was collected using a questionnaire instrument by a team of pre-trained research assistants from 1659 Nigerian youth aged 15 years and to 35 years. Another 16 focus group discussions involving young men and women from urban, rural and peri-urban youth populations were conducted. The focus groups were categorised by age, gender, and geographic location to aid in efficient discussions that were led by facilitators using appropriate language per need. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do youth consider as success?
2. What are young women's and men's aspirations about their future?
3. What are the constraints to young people's realisation of their aspirations?
4. How has the Covid-19 pandemic shaped young women's and men's aspirations about their future?
5. What adaptability and resilience strategies do young men and women employ to pursue their aspirations in Covid-19 era?

The overall objective of the study was to understand young men and women's aspirations and resilience during the covid-19 period. As such, an analysis of young people's self-understanding of success in what they termed as 'a good life'; the constraints and vulnerabilities they face in pursuit of that desired 'good life'; factors that promote resilience; and opportunities and capacities they have for building resilience in the light of the constraints was carried out. The Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis framework (CVA) was used to analyse young people's vulnerabilities and capacities as deduced from focus group discussions and the survey data. This analytical framework is best suited for unstable times such as during disaster or other life-changing circumstances. COVID era, youth-hood during the crisis and drawn-out youth unemployment in Africa can rightly be classified as both life-changing and disruptive. CVA is intended to draw attention to people's existing capacities and vulnerabilities in the face of instability. It also exposes how the crisis has affected people's capacities and new vulnerabilities that have come. Disaggregated along gender lines, CVA provides a doorway to understanding ways in which gender and other markers of difference, shape capacities and vulnerabilities of youth in their pursuit of 'a good life' in the COVID era. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS software to capture descriptive patterns and insights.

1.2 Findings and discussion

1.2.1 Young men and women’s view of ‘a good life’ and success

*“Ever since we’ve been growing up, we’ve been hearing; the youths are the leaders of tomorrow but tomorrow comes and we hear ‘they are still the leaders of tomorrow’ and then tomorrow keeps coming until we run out of that youthful energy then we are old.”*

This sentiment represents one of the views youth have about their current realities and life experiences in relation to their aspirations. On the one hand, they feel a sense of optimism and on the other a sense of measured pragmatic expectation. In their reflection on what ‘a good life’ or success means to them, the young men and women mentioned significant descriptive markers as shown below:

Portraying characteristics of acceptable femininity and acceptable masculinity: This refers to what is socially and culturally considered as features or characteristics of an acceptable or proper young woman or young man. The expectations of acceptable femininity and masculinity are self-imposed and also an expectation from other people in the community based on shared gender norms.

**Table 1: Views based on femininity and masculinity**

Young women’s views	Young men’s views
Based on acceptable femininity and masculinity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Educated women are respectable. <i>“In a community when you have two people, one who is educated and the other is not, when they need someone to speak they go to the one who is educated.”</i></li> <li>● Modesty, self-respect and being a role model <i>“I will describe a correct young woman in a community as a person that has a good dressing code because I guess dressing goes a long for young ladies”</i></li> <li>● Being law abiding and a good person. <i>“The community would see you as a good and acceptable youth when you contribute, when you are responsible, when you are participating and when you are also trustable.”</i></li> <li>● Having a family. <i>“As a woman, when you leave your father’s house to your husband’s house after your degree or education, that is success so to have a husband and children is a good life.”</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Being a married man. <i>“You get the stigma sometimes if you are not married in this country.”</i></li> <li>● One who can handle responsibilities: <i>“That is well respectful, as in respect elders because elders always like people like that</i></li> <li>● Being accepted by the community as a good man. <i>“The way people can be able to be your witness. When you have good strength and weakness. They can be able to stand on your behalf if you’re having a good life.”</i></li> <li>● Being able to add value to the community. <i>“When you’re not identified with society, you cannot be said to be living a good life.”</i> <i>“When you are ready to take your responsibilities. When you are self-reliant”</i></li> </ul>

Gender norms such as those identified by young women do influence their conditions of adversity and their resilience strategies. They can have a negative and positive impact on how young women adapt and recover from disruptive and harmful experiences. Similarly, according to OECD (2021), some societal expectations set the pace for restrictive masculinities. Examples of such gender norms are those which state that a “real” man should be the breadwinner, working for pay to provide for the material needs of the household; be financially dominant, earning more than

women; and be a “manly” leader, cultivating an assertive and space-occupying leadership style, among others. Such stereotypes that dictate what and how a proper young woman or young man should behave and live can place pressure on them to the extent of restricting them from opportunities that are outside the acceptable practices. As was expressed by the respondents, this can limit young people’s resilience. The stigmatisation of young people who choose counter-cultural practices and roles can lead to discrimination or violence as they are forced to conform. For instance, some young men reported how difficult it would be to explore business in cosmetics and young women’s choice to be truck drivers disparaged. In a positive light, norms of masculinity and femininity can provide opportunities for support and belonging by the community as was explicit in the study. Norms that prioritise a sense of responsibility and fulfilment of gender roles were an important motivating factor for both young men and women in putting efforts to fulfil those responsibilities. Norms of masculinity and femininity can also influence the coping strategies of young people. For example, young women may be socialised to share their emotions and to seek help while young men may be socialised to rely on themselves and to solve their problems without seeking help. These norms can affect resilience building that is achieved through help-seeking, problem-solving and social networks.

The study also revealed that financial capacity or potential for financial capacity characterise ‘a good life’.

**Table 2: Views based on financial capacity**

Young women’s views	Young men’s views
Based on financial capacity, stability and subsistence	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Debt free - <i>“when you can pay your house rent even if you don’t have a house of your own yet you ride a good car, eat good food, you are not owing anyone that is success.”</i></li> <li>● Financial stability. <i>“When you can afford anything either when you need it or when you want It, that is when you have a good life”</i></li> <li>● A woman who has financial ability. <i>“In a community the only person that will speak and they will listen is that person that has the money.”</i></li> <li>● Being independent to provide for the family. <i>“When you are just comfortable with your family without depending on anybody then you can say the person is successful and is living a good life.”</i></li> <li>● When you can provide for family needs. <i>“I feel success and good life is when you have your own family and you are living comfortably, you have everything you need.”</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Being financially stable: <i>“Someone who can say I have what [means] to feed my family with. I have a capital that no matter what it is, it sustains me not only me, my brothers. I don’t have any financial problems, and when it comes to peace and happiness.”</i></li> <li>● Running a successful business or having a good job <i>“The youth’s aspiration is to become a successful business men”</i></li> <li>● Having necessities of home and food. <i>“I just want to have something to take care of my family with. Success and being fulfilled in my heart is for me to be able to take care of myself, my immediate family, my extended family and probably the people around me”.</i></li> <li>● Achieving set goals <i>“Someone like me that has a wife, I have what it takes, and I have a good accommodation</i></li> </ul>

Financial stability plays a critical role in shaping young people’s resilience during the covid-era. In the young people’s reflections on what ‘a good life’ and success means to them, they referred to financial stability as shown in the Table 2 above. This is because having financial resources at one’s disposal helps to buffer against business and job losses and to manage uncertainties. Lack of financial capacity means that young people have no fallback options leading to

stress that further exacerbate crises such as the covid-19 pandemic.

Against the popular stereotype that men should be the sole breadwinners of the family, our findings show that young women too desired financial stability through sustainable and legitimate sources of income that would enable them to provide for their families. For instance, one of the female FDG participants asserted that *“In a community, the only person that will speak and they will listen is that person that has the money.”* Another young woman submitted: *“When you are comfortable with your family without depending on anybody, then you can say the person is successful and is living a good life.”* These are indicators to show that young women do not want to be a liability to anyone; they want good jobs or businesses which are crucial to living a successful life.

**Table 3: Views based on normative values**

Young women’s views	Young men’s views
Based on normative values, spirituality and moral standing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Portraying excellence in the work one does. <i>“Being successful is actually having a touch of excellence in whatever you do, it would make you be sought after, it means you are successful in or in what you do.”</i></li> <li>● Achieving a set goal <i>“Success is when you achieve something that you want. Success means achieving your specific goals. So actually success means doing some positive things personally”</i></li> <li>● Having wisdom or local sense. <i>“In my community, education and finance has not been a yard stick, education is necessary but my community is being governed by local sense, and local sense uses wisdom.”</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Morality - <i>“Somebody that is well is morally and religiously brought up and at least a youth that can proffer solutions to some difficult task in the community whenever they have issues, even the elders will always like to talk to such youth for such youth will always be described by elders as a decent person.”</i></li> <li>● Spirituality - <i>“My good life is what God says is a good life - contentment are things that are gotten from God. In that case now you might be poor, you might be in the gutter, you might not be able to afford food but once your heart is one with God and you feel like you are executing the purpose in your life you are having a good life.”</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Having good health and mental stability. <i>“When you have good health you will be able to do the things you ought to do.”</i></li> </ul>	

Both young men and women mentioned that spirituality and having a positive moral standing are markers of ‘a good life’ and success. They also see spirituality and faith as markers of resilience. Spirituality provides a sense of meaning and hope in the context of fear and uncertainty as was the case during covid-19 pandemic. Practices of prayer, spiritual music, and gathering together create an opportunity to access psychosocial support that can help improve mental and emotional well-being. Spirituality and morality also encourage social connection, which was a critical need during the pandemic due to physical isolation. Only young women alluded to good health as a marker of good life and success.

**What do you consider a top priority for success?**

The quantitative survey showed that the young men and women considered four key priorities as markers of success: Being financially stable 27.3%; creating a good business 20.5%; having a good job 16.9%; and having good education 11% as highlighted in the table below.

**Table 4: Top priorities**

Criteria	Total young women(YW) and young men (YM)	Young Men	Young Women
Good job	16.9	42.5	57.5
Start family	4	40.3	58.7
Provide support to my family	10.4	48.6	51.4
Provide support to my community/country	2.7	52.3	47.7
Being financially stable	27.3	54.4	45.6
Opportunity to travel	2.7	54.5	45.5
Create a good business	20.5	52.4	47.6
Good education	11.5	48.7	51.3
Own properties	2.2	45.9	54.1
Have power authority and control	0.4	83.3	16.7
Independence and freedom from parents	0.6	60	40
Other, priorities	0.8	46.2	53.8

These top priorities attest to the young men and women’s definitions of ‘a good life’ and success identified in Table 4. The young people also identified barriers and vulnerabilities as well as opportunities and capacities they encountered in their efforts to achieve ‘a good life’ as detailed below:

**Young women’s barriers, difficulties and vulnerabilities**

Young women invoked various barriers and conditions in the COVID-era that made it difficult for them to achieve ‘a good life.’ In the focus group discussions, education achievement was identified as an important enabler for surviving and achieving ‘a good life’ and most felt that lack of it was a significant drawback. As this was one of the top priority markers for success (Table 4 above), no wonder that it was also cited as a significant constraint because a lack of it would mean closed opportunities.

Loss of jobs, loss of business and inability to pay loans was experienced and young women who were in business had experienced losses that disrupted their aims. One of them asserted, *“someone like me that collected a loan in 2019 to improve on my business but due to COVID-19 I haven’t been able to pay back the loan up till now and even what I invested the money on did not yield anything tangible because of the lock down,”* a sentiment agreed by others. *“It wasn’t a good experience at all and I was affected as well. I lost my job because I was working in the hospitality industry and I said I can start up a business myself.”* These losses had financial implications.

Young women also had the view that a lack of connections contributed to the vulnerabilities and constraints that they faced. Social connections include networks that are helpful to link young women to opportunities for new skills, businesses or jobs. As an enabler of resilience and a core factor in achieving life goals, bridging linkages with people within similar social-economic conditions but who have better chances in life is critical to young women’s pursuit of ‘a good life’. Closely related to lack of connections was what the young women term as an “inability to communicate.” On further probing, the phrase seemed to refer to gender discrimination in cases where the social linkages become exploitative as was explained: *“When a woman is seeking for job and the hiring manager is a man, he will most likely want to be intimate with the young woman before he can give her the job, so it a serious barrier*

*that young women face.” “Even if the world is progressing in time, people still believe it’s a man’s world, like it is also there in the movies we watch every day, the discrimination is increasing by the day.”*

Sexual and gender-based violence leading to unwanted pregnancies were also reported due to long periods of confinement in which young women were abused sexually as was expressed: *“So when somebody is confined indoors definitely something happens so the result is pregnancy and it is unwanted one.”* Unwanted pregnancies affected young women’s education and career prospects. Other forms of violence were experienced: *“I know some women are still working-class women who don’t stay at home, they were taking out their frustration on their husbands. I also saw a man that was beating the wife, he beat the wife to the point that the wife died.”* Young women felt that the existing gender discrimination in norms and practices at work places barriers to their careers and achieving what they consider as a good life for themselves.

*“In an organisation they will prefer male to female. All this maternity leave, bringing kids to their organisation is like a disturbance to them. So going for women is just like disturbing the place, later on she will be complaining that she wants to take the child to a place and most organisations do not like that so they go for the male than the women.”*

Gender norms in roles and careers that are ‘acceptable’ for women were identified: Some women felt that there are careers that are not suitable for them: *“I tell people I’ll never find it okay when I see a woman being a security, in as much as they clamour for gender equality or whatever, or a woman being a carpenter there are some certain jobs that should be for a man, as much as there are certain jobs for a woman.”* Other difficulties experienced were lack of exposure; social disruptions; and loss of family and friends.

### **Young men’s barriers, difficulties and vulnerabilities**

Young men lost businesses which affected their financial capacity due to the closure of schools and limited movement during covid pandemic. *“I had a business in a school area and it affected me because virtually everything I had, because people could not patronise so I was affected financially.”* Those in the entertainment industry also were affected, *“I am an entertainer, I am an MC, now lockdown throughout was there were no parties. We had about 8 months of no parties.”*

The young men’s strategic need of building their capacity through training was disrupted as those who were in colleges had to stop with some losing interest in education altogether as was expressed:

*“Recently we know what ASUU passed through for many months so somebody can not set a target, you cannot say I will start this course at this time and by this time I will be able to finish it, because maybe a four years course you end up spending maybe 8years doing it or 5 6 years. I have a brother that spent up to about 11 years in school so for you to now achieve your aspiration or goal in life.”*

Restriction of movement and confinement in homes disrupted their social networking and entertainment activities as was stated, *“you can’t go to the viewing centre and watch football and these are some of the things that we youths like a lot.”* Another problem experienced by the young men was the loss of relationships because of the inability to communicate and meet.

*“...to me the men were more affected than the women the reason is in my own community, in the North specifically most of the ladies don’t go out to work and look for what to eat, it’s the men that go out and look for what they will eat and bring it home for them to feed themselves. In such situations, most of the men that do go out to look for their daily bread they were seriously affected because they are used to it you know but the females on the other hand they just sit down and wait for the men to bring it so that is my own reason that is why I am saying that the men were really affected.” (young man, Kaduna)*

The above sentiment expresses the unique difficulties experienced by men due to gender norms that relegate men to roles of providing and women that of domestic work. In this case, pressure on men to provide during covid was evident. In addition to this challenge in other instances, men also struggled with gender norms around businesses that

are not socially acceptable to them. They asserted, *“It is odd to see a man selling cosmetics.”* They also faced what they referred as *“societal pressure from the family, from the society.”* Adding, *“we all looking for an easy way out, how can I just leave this place, how can I just buy my wife a car, how can I just build a house like he said “how can he marry” how can I start up my business again! So regardless of the situation we have at hand, we are all looking for the easy way out and the pressure is too much on men.”* Further to this problem was men getting into debt to sustain the norms and pressure from family:

*“Unreasonable demands from wives [i.e] bills every day yet no work. I know of a family who presently during the covid-19, things went rough for them, tough to the extent that the man is owing like millions now and in one way or the other the man tried his possible best to set up a business for the woman, for the wife, Could you believe if she is going to buy bread of 100 naira, she will pen it down, if she buys just matches, she will pen it down, if the man comes from wherever he goes to, na your bill, you go sort it. Yet he is the one that set up a business for her.”*

Young men faced the barriers of bureaucracy in government when they seek services such as youth entrepreneurship support and energy access: *“If the government can revive power so that we can have 24hrs electricity, I am very sure so many youths will run their businesses, so many factories will come back to life and you know there will be a lot of changes in terms of the economy.”* Others agreed, noting,

*“[There is] bad governance, bad governance in every sense of it, no assistance or little to no assistance like grants, and also you can talk about corruption when we are living in a society that when the budget that is made for education, somebody is sitting on it.”*

*“No stability in the country today, no stability in the sense that there is nothing to work with long term. Maybe for instance, price structure, you cannot work with a certain price cost analysis as a youth doing business in the long term because the market is so unstable.”*

Young men also cited discrimination by age as a barrier they face terming it as *“mistrust of youth.”* For instance as they argued,

*“As a youth you will never go to bank and say I am in distress, I want to take a loan, the first thing they say is how old are you as if but if you try and get that money somewhere else or you’re coming to save it with them, they will not bother, so it’s actually two questions, how old are you and where do you come from [that matters].”*

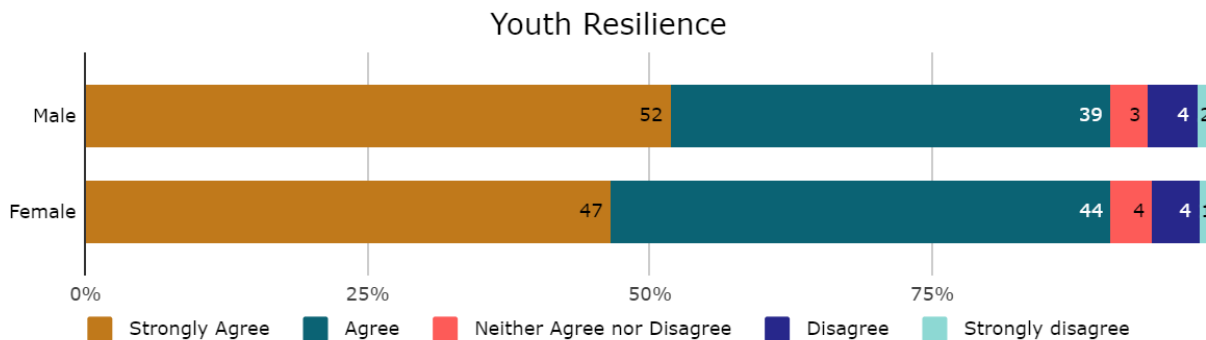
*“They want a 30-year-old person who graduated from school at the age of 27 or 28 years to have 10 years of experience. How? They will now ask you, we are currently employing age 23-27, how is that possible? I’m 30 years old and I’ve been searching, searching, searching from different firms now I couldn’t get any and that’s why people will lie [i.e] back-date their age.”*

Young people living with disabilities had unique difficulties moving as one of them stated; *“I was even unable to get to some places because I needed to go out alone before when I got to the street and I wanted to cross, I may ask that ‘my brother, please help me to cross’ but now this is pandemic time, you don’t want to touch another person. So there was a time I spent 3 good hours standing at a semi-mediocre express waiting for somebody to help me to cross that road and people were passing by me.”*



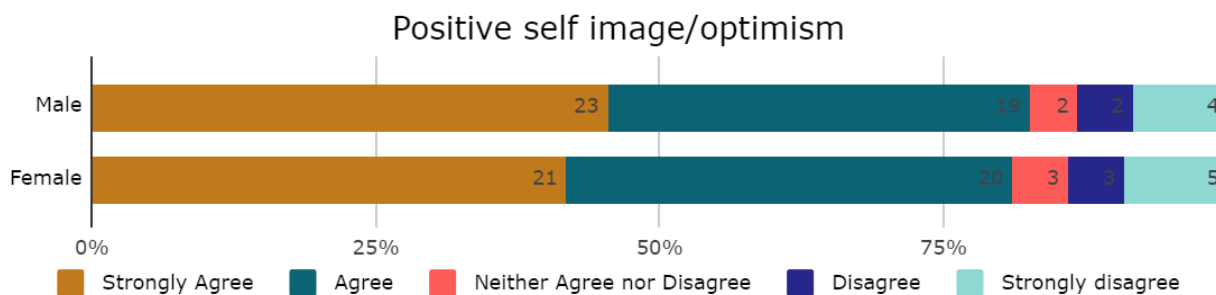
**Resilience in the context of young people’s barriers and vulnerabilities**

In the light of these vulnerabilities and barriers experienced by both young men and young women, the results of the youth resilience scale were analysed. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 means strongly disagreed, 2 means disagree, 3 means neutral, 4 means agree and 5 means strongly agree, the youth were asked to rate the level of agreement on 8 aspects of resilience. The analysis showed that they averagely rated all the aspects of resilience at four and above implying that they agreed and strongly agreed with all the aspects of resilience as shown in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1: Youth Resilience Rating by gender**

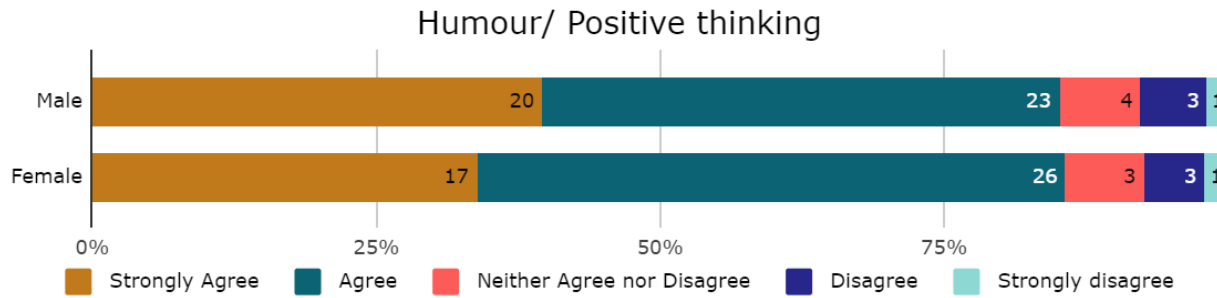
Besides, the elements of youth resilience, other enablers of resilience including optimism, humour, social support, emotional regulation and spirituality were weighed against whether the young men and women perceived that they possessed these qualities. In all the characteristics more than 75% strongly agreed and agreed that they possess the characteristics as follows:



**Figure 2: Positive self-image/ optimism by gender**

As shown in Figure 2, positive self-image and optimism as an enabler of youth resilience showed that 41% of women strongly agreed (21%) and agreed (20) and 42% of young men strongly agreed (23%) and agreed (19) that their optimism and positive self-image aided their resilience. Following other studies (Dumont and Provost 1999), optimism buffers individuals from hopelessness in states of widespread social and economic disruption such as the covid-19 pandemic. Others have also argued that “Intrinsic curiosity and an optimistic outlook” are key ingredients that contribute to resilience, (Dvorsky, Breaux, and Becker 2021) an observation that was also evident in the current study. This optimism was also reflected in the FGDs as they narrated stories of internal strength they bring in the face of covid-19 adversity: *“There are times when after a long day’s work, you’ve not even made up to a thousand naira you just say if na die man go die, something must kill a man you’ll just chill with the boys, take one or two bottles, hold 500 naira that will take you back to work tomorrow and that’s okay.”* (Young man Kaduna).” This sentiment points to daily efforts to seek means of living while remaining optimistic despites difficulties.

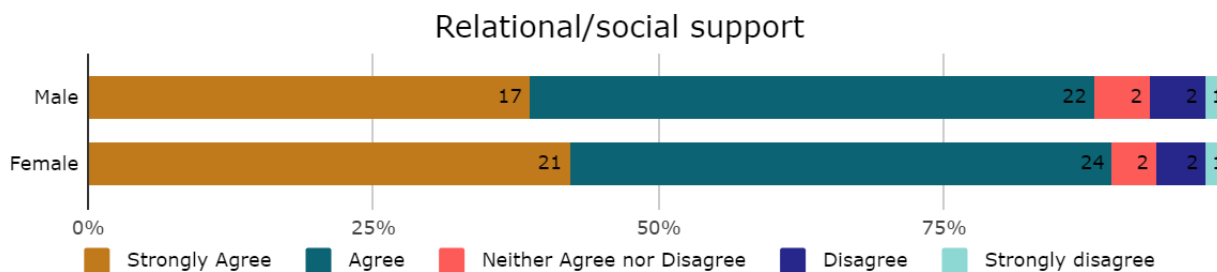
Use of humour and positive thinking as protective measures for resilience and as means of responding to adversity is shown in Figure 3 as follows:



**Figure 3: Humour by gender**

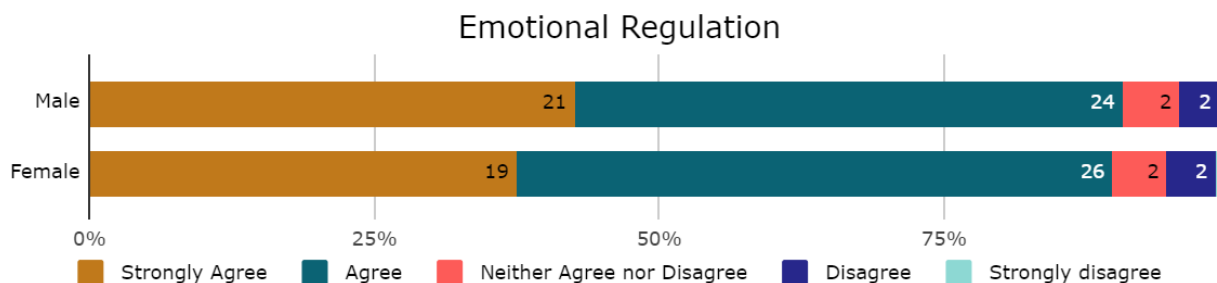
Humour has been previously seen as a significant factor that promotes resilience (Cann and Collette 2014; Abbasi 2017; Neenan 2017). It acts as a means of deflecting difficult situations and as was indicated in the current study most youth, 86% that is 43% young women and 43% young men strongly agreed and agreed that they use humour or appreciate humour in dealing with their day-to-day situations.

Despite the lockdowns, restricted movement and disrupted social life, the young men and women reported having been part of social support that buffered them in these conditions. Social media was one of the spaces where mutual relational support was mediated as well as in smaller residential enclaves. As shown in Figure 4 above, the majority strongly agreed and agreed to social support being significant in their resilience journey. More women (21%) than men (17%) reported utilising relational and social support as shown in Figure 4 below:

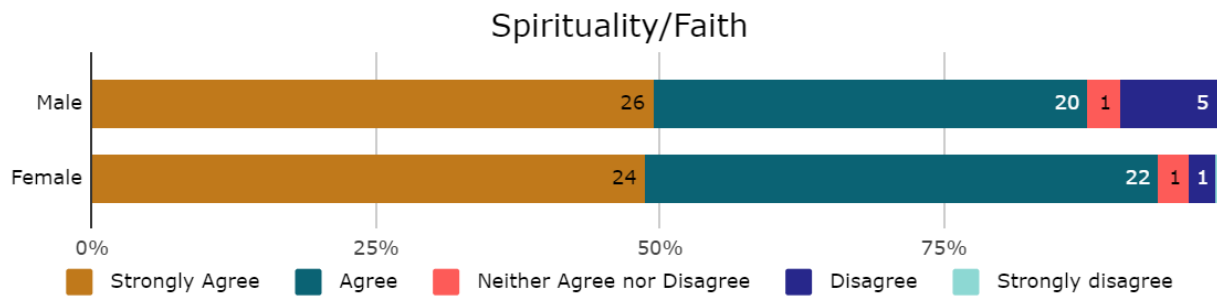


**Figure 4: Relational/ social support by gender**

Equally, the results on emotional regulation and spiritual factors showed a similar trend with 92% of young men and women strongly agreeing and agreeing on spirituality and 90% on emotional regulation as shown in Figures 5 and 6 below:



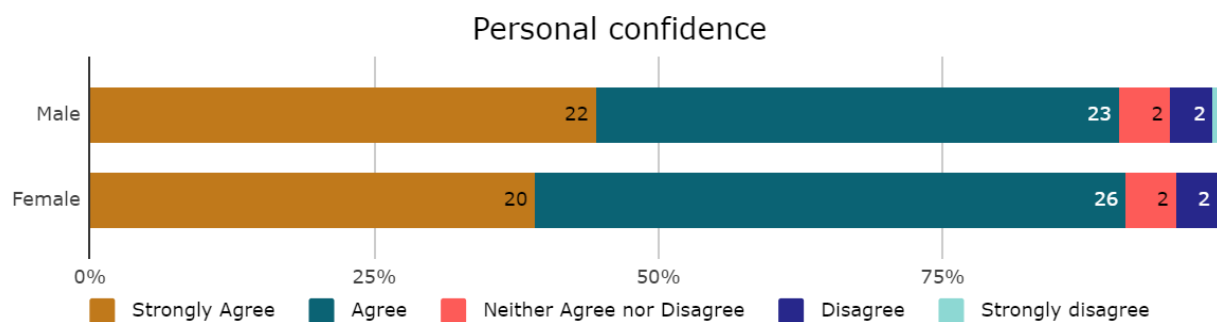
**Figure 5: Emotional regulation by gender**



**Figure 6: Spirituality/ Faith by Gender**

As was reported in focus group discussions, religious groups provided spiritual support through online meetings: *“I know a church where I worship where we have a daily prayer session in the morning and there was a time they went online. Nobody knew the church and now millions of people are all overwatch since people were not allowed to go to church, they don’t have any excuses whatsoever not to worship.”*

The young people want to be seen as achievers and they communicate that to others while manifesting their own confidence in the choices they make. As one respondent asserted; *“I want to define a youth as somebody who doesn’t fear death. I have discovered that as youth nothing really scares us, even what will kill, we should all know something called ‘kugbulaja’ Sometimes when we are supposed to be advised, we will be nagged and nagging is different from advice, so because I want to achieve something and you probably you want to tell me, you want to advise me not to and instead of advising me not to do it, instead of advising me as a youth or convincing me, you’ll now nag me, chastise me but because I fear nothing, I don’t care what will happen and in the course of that, take a wrong decision that I really want to know what you say will happen. So society in my own perspective does not see us as achievers. So, that’s my point.” (Young man, 21-35, Oyo).*



**Figure 7: Personal confidence by gender**

The respondents indicated that exposure to adversity built their resilience and stirred new forms of problem-solving and opportunities.

From further discussions, the young men and women identified the following opportunities, capacities and skills that they opined as important factors that promote resilience:

**Young women’s capacities, skills and opportunities**

<p><b>Education</b> <i>“it takes you to places you ordinarily would not have imagined going and makes you stand out confidently, outspoken and gives you a sense of belonging, so education is very important.”</i></p>	<p><b>Plan B thinking: disruption preparedness was stirred:</b>  <i>“The COVID-19 pandemic opened a lot of people’s eyes, some of the people that were working and are comfortable with the little they were earning before COVID-19 pandemic had nothing to fall back at during the pandemic because they have no plan B so COVID-19 has thought them to plan ahead like having more than one source of income in case of any unforeseen event.”</i></p>	<p><b>Formation of skill building groups</b> where young women can gather and learn new skills together. These groups also act as psychosocial support groups</p>
---	---	---

<p><b>Intersecting privileges</b> - <i>“I think the women faced more challenges than the men although, I didn’t really feel it because my husband is a civil servant COVID-19 or no COVID-19 he still gets paid and we are able to put food on the table but in some families.”</i></p>	<p><b>Gender norms that strengthen and promote social capital among women:</b> <i>“A female can easily call on someone for assistance and the person would understand. But men are full of ego and they would be dying and not be able to open up so that someone can help them out and even if they open up, not everyone has the mind to help a man. I think men face a lot.”</i></p>
---	---

<p><b>Digital and online business opportunities:</b> <i>“I was able to take my business online and sold jewelry. I created a clique [clip] and I marketed it.”</i></p>	<p><b>Spiritual growth and support opportunities:</b> <i>“I know a church where I worship where we have a daily prayer session in the morning and there was a time they went online. Nobody knew the church and now millions of people are all over watch since people were not allowed to go to church, they don’t have any excuses whatsoever not to worship.”</i></p>
--	--

**Young men’s capacities, skills and opportunities**

<p><b>Self-discovery:</b> <i>“It created many opportunities for people to showcase in the Internet and the entertainment scene because people were made to stay at home more often, it’s not like they were going out so that made them realise [discover] themselves.”</i></p>	<p><b>Self-discovery of profitable skills:</b> <i>“Some people left what they were doing before to become comedians to become skit makers and I think for some people it was a bit of a discovery to discover who they really were, and also some people like myself respective we took up online courses so yeah I believe it's one of the opportunities that the pandemic brought to me.”</i></p>
---	---

**Internet-based fraud/scamming:** Although this is an illegal activity for income generation, young men attained acceptability from their families after being 'successful' in scamming work. *"[Because] the only good and acceptable young man in every community is somebody that has money, values come after money. That is why our guys have decided to choose internet fraud. These are the yahoo people. Even their mothers gathered themselves together and started having community meetings because they celebrate that level of success."* (Oyo)

**Learning alternative skills beyond jobs:** *"It is COVID that taught me that I have to look elsewhere. I have to look beyond what I know and not depend on one thing, if I am working for someone I make sure I find something on my own, I should be able to offer service to people even when there is such a lockdown tomorrow and in the course of COVID19."*

**New forms of work:** *"Offering services, affiliate marketing, selling of cosmetics, production/making of shoes, making of clothing, tailors and so on and so forth."*

These new opportunities play a significant role in enabling and promoting resilience in the face of COVID pandemic. It has been previously argued that resilience does not solely reside in an individual but it arises from a person's supportive experiences within the environment (Seccombe 2002). The listed opportunities that the young men and young women encountered in the context of COVID pandemic represented multiple intrinsic and extrinsic promotive factors to their resilience

Young women's strategic interests included economic empowerment, further education, skills on online trading and advertising, skills in soap making, tailoring, bitcoin trading, making hair, sewing, fashion design and capital for starting businesses. They asserted that these skills would position them for change and recovery from the effects of the COVID pandemic. They however emphatically felt that cybercrime is not a good opportunity for income generation no matter the circumstances.

## 2. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has explored young men and women's definition of 'a good life' and success; the constraints and vulnerabilities they face in pursuit of 'a good life'; factors that promote resilience; and opportunities and capacities they have for building resilience in the light of the constraints. The gender-differentiated analysis of these issues revealed that young people's resilience is shaped by extrinsic factors such as social norms and existing policies and intrinsic factors such as optimism, self-confidence, humour and emotional regulation. Gender-differentiated factors and realities that present barriers and make young people more vulnerable in covid-era were also identified showing some unique as well as overlaps between young men and young women's responses. For instance, young men and young women define 'a good life' using similar notions of acceptability i.e. acceptable masculinity and acceptable femininity respectively. The young men and women framed 'a good life' as their broad goal and cited opportunities and capacities they have engaged to achieve that 'good life' in the COVID-era conditions. Notably, self-discovery, new business ideas, new skills, online trading and social networks were top opportunities that were alluded to.

These findings provide evidence for designing resilience intervention programs for young men and young women in Nigeria and other places that share common social and economic realities in the COVID era. This study shows that gender norms of acceptable femininity and masculinity shape the coping mechanisms of young women and men. While other research has shown that men are more inclined to individualistic means of coping to build resilience and women are more dependent on social networks (Sneed et al. 2006), this study showed that both men and women depend on social networks and have utilised social capital in their pursuits. With this evidence that multiple internal and external adaptive systems are needed for youth resilience in the covid-era, it calls for 'multisystem' programmatic interventions and advocacy response. The series of challenges that the youth face in the face of COVID require a

multisystem approach and require awareness through a multifaceted lens. As the findings showed, individual characteristics are not enough in themselves to help strengthen or promote youth resilience. External factors and social networks are critical. For instance, enabling policies and youth-centric structures need to be brought to the fore in designing programmes and interventions in the context of disruption of the COVID-era. In the case of Nigerian young men and women, these include supportive policies, accessible market systems, bridging linkages and opportunities for social networking. Interventions and empowerment mechanisms should be aware of internal and external factors that promote or hinder resilience among young men and women. If this is not considered, pressure can be mounted on the youth to bounce back yet the environment is not conducive for that. This pressure can become a hegemonic practice that undermines or disparages young people's coping mechanisms pushing them to further harm. Youth-centric and gender-responsive actions would effectively promote resilience and prevent harmful coping mechanisms such as online scamming, gender-based violence at work, and discrimination by age and gender.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations for programmatic and advocacy interventions in support of young people's resilience are proposed:

- a. Interventions to strengthen young people's resilience should be gender responsive and youth-centric i.e. by youth and for you based on gender differentiated needs and interests. To achieve that, young people should be involved in the planning and decision-making process to ensure programs are responsive and relevant to their needs and interests.
- b. Skill-building opportunities need to be availed to young people. These would include entrepreneurship vocational training that would support their recovery and resilience in the post-pandemic world. This can be achieved by identifying skills that are in demand in a particular context and matching that with skills training to enable young people to succeed. The provision of apprenticeship opportunities can also boost young people's skills and readiness to work.
- c. The provision of infrastructure, equipment and training in technology and digital business should be incorporated into youth empowerment programs. This would improve accessibility to business opportunities in digital spaces as well as facilitate trading and social networking.
- d. Equity and inclusion should be prioritised to ensure young people who are affected by intersecting situations such as youth living with disability, those lacking formal education, those from ethnic minorities, survivors of violence and those who became parents while young are identified and responded to. Advocate for equitable access to credit resources and education, health, empowerment opportunities and other drivers or enablers of resilience.
- e. Promote and provide skills such as networking, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork to bolster young people's confidence and consequent resilience.
- f. Support and encourage positive social norms such as social connections to build social capital and supportive communities. Social capital was a significant resource that promoted young people's resilience. Encourage through peer modelling, positive norms of femininity and masculinity and discourage harmful and limiting norms.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This study was conducted in the context of the Africa Youth Aspirations and Resilience (AYAR) research by PASGR in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. AYAR is a three years' initiative that is running between 2021 and 2024 to understand youth aspirations in their own words. The project covers Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Mastercard Foundation, its staff, or its Board of Directors. The views expressed do not also necessarily represent those of PASGR.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Abbasi, Mohammed. 2017. "Relationship between Humor and Subjective Well-Being with Regard to Mediating Role of Resilience in Caregivers of Patients with Spinal Injury." *Internal Medicine Today* 23 (4): 301–6.
- Bezek, Erin. 2010. *Gender Differences in Resilience in the Emerging Adulthood Population*. Rochester Institute of Technology.

- Blatt-Eisengart, Ilana. 2009. "Sex Differences in the Manifestation of Adolescent Problem Behaviors." Doctoral Thesis, Michigan: Temple University.
- Bonnano, G. 2008. "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive after Extremely Aversive Events? Psychol. Trauma: Theory, Res. Pract." *Policy S* 1: 101–13.
- Cann, Arnie, and Chantal Collette. 2014. "Sense of Humor, Stable Affect, and Psychological Well-Being." *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 10 (3).
- Ray, Debraj, 'Aspirations, Poverty, and Economic Change', Understanding Poverty (New York, 2006; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Sept. 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195305191.003.0028>, accessed 15 August 2023.
- Dumont, Michelle, and Marc A. Provost. 1999. "Resilience in Adolescents: Protective Role of Social Support, Coping Strategies, Self-Esteem, and Social Activities on Experience of Stress and Depression." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 28 (3): 343–63.
- Dvorsky, Melissa R., Rosanna Breaux, and Stephen P. Becker. 2021. "Finding Ordinary Magic in Extraordinary Times: Child and Adolescent Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 30 (11): 1829–31.
- Galambos, Nancy L., Erin T. Barker, and Harvey J. Krahn. 2006. "Depression, Self-Esteem, and Anger in Emerging Adulthood: Seven-Year Trajectories." *Developmental Psychology* 42 (2): 350.
- Hankin, Benjamin L., Lyn Y. Abramson, Terrie E. Moffitt, Phil A. Silva, Rob McGee, and Kathryn E. Angell. 1998. "Development of Depression from Preadolescence to Young Adulthood: Emerging Gender Differences in a 10-Year Longitudinal Study." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 107 (1): 128.
- Kelley, Thomas M. 2005. "Natural Resilience and Innate Mental Health."
- Leipold, Bernhard, and Werner Greve. 2009. "Resilience: A Conceptual Bridge between Coping and Development." *European Psychologist* 14 (1): 40–50.
- Masten, Ann S., and Dante Cicchetti. 2016. "Resilience in Development: Progress and Transformation." In *Developmental Psychopathology: Risk, Resilience, and Intervention*, 271–333. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-47353-006>.
- Masten, Ann S., and Frosso Motti-Stefanidi. 2020. "Multisystem Resilience for Children and Youth in Disaster: Reflections in the Context of COVID-19." *Adversity and Resilience Science* 1 (2): 95–106. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-020-00010-w>.
- Neenan, Michael. 2017. *Developing Resilience: A Cognitive-Behavioural Approach*. Taylor & Francis.
- Ong, Anthony D., Cindy S. Bergeman, Toni L. Bisconti, and Kimberly A. Wallace. 2006. "Psychological Resilience, Positive Emotions, and Successful Adaptation to Stress in Later Life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91 (4): 730.
- Putman, Robert D. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1): 65–78.
- Putnam, Robert. 1993. "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life." *The American* 4.
- Secombe, Karen. 2002. "'Beating the Odds' versus 'Changing the Odds': Poverty, Resilience, and Family Policy." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2): 384–94.
- Simona, V. 2020. "Nigeria: population 1950-2020 ": Statista. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1122838/population-of-nigeria/> (Accessed: 23 August 2023).
- Thamari-Odhiambo M. 2020. Negotiations of Femininity in Times of Livelihood Vulnerabilities; The Saharan Journal, issue 1 (2), 1-25; National Institute for African Studies (NIAS)
- United Nations Development Programme. 2021. "Analysing long-term socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 across diverse African contexts." UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa
- Ungar, M. 2008. "Resilience across Cultures." *British Journal of Social Work* 38 (2): 218–35. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl343>.

Ungar, Michael, Gerry Connelly, Linda Liebenberg, and Linda Theron. 2019. "How Schools Enhance the Development of Young People's Resilience." *Social Indicators Research* 145 (2): 615–27.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-017-1728-8>.

Vinayak, Seema, and Jotika Judge. 2018. "Resilience and Empathy as Predictors of Psychological Wellbeing among Adolescents." *International Journal of Health Sciences and Research* 8 (4): 192–200.

World Population Review. 2022. "Nigeria Population 2022." World Population Review.