EXPLORING THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF SKILLS GAP AND UNEMPLOYMENT: THE ROLE OF SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

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A B S T R A C T

Unemployment has become a persistent and pressing issue in Nigeria, with far-reaching economic and social implications. There are claims that poor education quality contributes to skills gaps among university graduates. Consequently, employers of labour, the private sector, in particular, hire expatriate workers because Nigerian university graduates are not measuring up. This study derives data from a secondary source of Labour Force Statistics: Unemployment and Underemployment Report of Quarter 4 2020, reported in March 2021 by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in Nigeria. This secondary data is the latest labour statistics in Nigeria on unemployment. Four research questions were raised, and data extracted were analyzed from the national survey with percentages and bar charts in an Excel sheet. The study revealed that socio-demographic variables such as education, age group, gender, and residence (rural-urban location) contributed to Nigeria's unemployment rate. Hence, the government should ensure that relevant market skills are built into Nigerian educational curricula. There is also an urgent need by the government at all levels to create programs and policies to enhance vocational training to equip young ones for a good living. Lastly, efforts should be made to promote opportunities in rural areas to reduce rural-urban migration to the barest minimum.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fundamental role of education is to embody students with the knowledge and skills and prepare them with ethical responsibility for the manpower needs of their immediate environment and beyond (Chan, 2016; Spellings Commission, 2006). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization also reiterates that the objective of university education is to provide opportunities for individuals to be armed with skills and knowledge which place them in a vantage position to derive benefits from society and lead fulfilling lives, and contribute to the developmental progress of their immediate environment (Okojie, 2013). However, in recent times, society has raised the alarm over the quality and functionality of higher education owing to graduates' job performance in the workplace (Francis, 2015). There is evidence of a gap between the skills acquired from higher education institutions and the skills demonstrated in the workplace (Tan et al., 2022). Even though reasonable efforts have been made to improve the quality of higher education in the past decades, with all these, it appears little success has been achieved as graduates cannot marry knowledge acquired in schools with that of the labour market (Olofintoye & Prince, 2013). This trend continues despite employability skills being crucial to the workplace, as no organization can survive without them (Tan et al., 2022). The inference drawn from this consensus is that Nigerian higher education is not producing relevant market skills, which might

have led to the skills gap (Onuocha & Ewuzie, 2012; Pitan O. & Adedeji, 2012).

Consequently, having lost faith in Nigerian graduates that cannot measure up, the private sector is focusing its attention on hiring expatriate workers who are more committed, productive, and progressive (Naithani, Jha, & Ranchi, 2010). The reason may not be farfetched, as noted by (Onuocha & Ewuzie, 2012), that employers of labour often decry the skills gap among Nigerian university graduates. Some other scholars, like Francis (2015), Baah-Boateng (2015), and Alphen (2012), also reported the complaints of employers on the skills gap among Nigerian graduates.

However, it should be noted that other variables could contribute to unemployment in Nigeria. On the age-group variable contributing to unemployment, Axelrad, Malul, & Israel (2018) and International Labor Office (2011) reported that the unemployment rate is much higher among youth than the adult population in several countries. The gender variable distribution has also been shown to contribute to unemployment as Passinhas & Proença (2019) noted that various factors, such as educational disparities or gender biases in hiring practices, could influence the higher unemployment rate among males. It was also reported that gender contributes to employment possibilities (Nkhumeleni et al., 2022), while rural-urban migration also causes or impacts unemployment (Baah-Boateng, 2015). Hence, these variables of interest were captured in Q4 2020 report on unemployment and underemployment in Nigeria. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in Q4 2020, in its report of labour force statistics on unemployment, reported how sociodemographic variations and distributions are contributing to unemployment. The sociodemographic factors, which include education, age group, gender, and residence were captured in the Q4 2020 report which is the most current available statistics on unemployment in Nigeria as of June 2023. The NBS reported in Q4 2020 that unemployment rose to 33.3 percent from 27.1 percent in Q2 2020. Thus, the total unemployment in Q4 2020 stood at 23,187,389 from 21,764,617, the highest in at least 13 years and the second-rate worldwide (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021; Izuaka, 2023). The NBS figure shows that between Q2 2020 and Q4 2020, during the reference period, an astronomical rise of 1,422,772 has been added to the Q2 2020 figure. Unemployment continues unabated. The phenomenal upsurge in the unemployment rate necessitates this study. Hence, this study sought to investigate variables contributing to unemployment in Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine how sociodemographic variables (education, age group, gender, and residence) determine unemployment rates in Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Graduate Employability
Employability means demonstrating functional skills and attitudes required in the workplace, which is fundamental for career advancement (Overtoom, 2000). Employability skills transcend technical competence. It includes but is not limited to basic academic skills, higher-order thinking skills, and personal qualities with more detailed skill sets. It is required in all cadres of occupation (Robinson, 2000; Sherer & Eadie, 1987). Employability skills are often divided into two types: transferable or generic skills, which can be used across large numbers of different occupations, and vocational skills, which are specific, occupational, or technical skills needed to work within a discipline or occupational group (Proctor & Dutta 1995).

Meanwhile, a survey conducted to track the destination of graduates by the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria in 2007 revealed that as many as 60 percent of graduates are unemployable primarily because they do not have sufficient skills to adapt to the needs of the ever-changing and dynamic labour market (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2007). In many advanced economies, life or employability skills are prioritized due to their pivotal place in the world of work but are rarely taught as part of the curriculum of any educational system in Nigeria (Adedeji &Oyebade, 2016).

2.2 Skills Gap and Unemployment
The skills gap refers to the difference between skills demand and skills supply. It is a negative state of disequilibrium because it means shortages, while skills mismatch refers to both positive and negative disequilibrium, which indicates over skilling/surplus or under skilling/shortage respectively (World Economic Forum, 2014). A university degree is worthless if the bearer cannot demonstrate the skills, attitudes, and values expected as a consequence of their education (Onuocha & Ewuzie, 2012). Meanwhile, (Baah-Boateng, 2015) noted that employers of labour have observed that recent graduates lack the basic skills to complete simple routine assignments, which gives the impression that certification is a mere formality rather than an indication

of achievement. Similarly, Pitan & Adedeji (2012) posited that many graduates lack creative thinking, communication, and workplace readiness skills. Harvey, Locke & Morey (1997) emphasized that most employers are looking for proactive graduates who can demonstrate higher-level skills such as analysis, critique, synthesis and multi layered communication to facilitate innovative teamwork in catalyzing the transformation of their organization. In other words, employers expect graduates to have developed subject-specific and employability skills that equip them as specialists and generalists (Maripazan & Ombra, 2016).

Moreover, due to this skills gap, university graduates now find it difficult to get jobs because they lack the right skills, and a mismatch exists between what was taught and what the labour market requires (Alphen, 2012). Therefore, the world is changing in measuring skill and human capital meaningfully rather than spending a considerable duration for educational attainment without commensurate values acquired from the universities (Carlson, 2002). Thus, the labour market is no longer certificate-driven but market needs-driven.

2.3 Curriculum and Employability

The National Universities Commission (NUC), in her Manual of Accreditation Procedures for Academic Programmes in Nigerian Universities (MAP), spelt out the place of the curriculum in NUC approved Minimum Academic Standards (MACS) as follows:

''The curriculum of the programme to be accredited should be adequate to prepare practitioners at an appropriate level in the particular field. It should include adequate theoretical knowledge and skills to fulfil the requirements for specific job objectives and to equip the graduates with adequate communication skills (written and oral) and a sound knowledge of the social, political, and economic environment in which the graduate shall live, work and make useful contributions as citizens''(Federal Government of Nigeria, 2013).

The NUC document reiterated that aside from adequate theoretical knowledge, the curriculum must emphasize the skills graduates shall employ to live, work and make valuable contributions as citizens. The National Policy on Education (NPE) document as well highlights the critical importance of a practical-based curriculum that embodies graduates with skills and competencies as follows:

'' That Tertiary Educational institutions shall pursue these goals through the provision of a more practical based curriculum relevant to the needs of the labour market; generation and dissemination of knowledge, skills, and competencies that contribute to national and local economic goals, which enable students to succeed in a knowledge-based economy''(Federal Government of Nigeria, 2013).

In the same vein, Asuquo and Agboola (2014) corroborated that quality education through an improved curriculum would, in no doubt, give millions of its recipients the skills to rise out of poverty, improve their status, mobility, and decision making which will, in turn, propel development, while its failure may likely result to socio-economic crises in the nearest future. In other words, appropriate curricula will likely enhance employability if subject content addresses specific and generic skills and critical thinking (Lowden, Hall, Elliot & Lewin, 2011).

Furthermore, the position of Obanya (2003) is instructive that there is a need to build employability skills into the curriculum as specific fields of knowledge are useful only to the extent to which they can help in inculcating the core generic skills, namely: analytical power, communication, problem-solving, team spirit, creativity, and versatility. A similar view has been echoed by Okebukola (2002) that the labour market is changing continuously, and the curriculum content has to be relevant to the needs of society. However, Gunn and Bell (2010) noted that those saddled with higher education provisions concurred on the need to accommodate students' employment needs but are also concerned that following such an employability agenda path would erode academic standards and objectives. Meanwhile, this can be addressed by framing the issue by exploring how academics can teach their subject content to promote employability skills and attributes rather than diminishing the academic content (Coopers & Lybrand, 1998).

Therefore, Nigerian university curricula may need to be revisited to close these perceived skills and content gaps as maintained that graduates of Nigerian faculties of education, for example, were inadequately prepared in both content and pedagogy; hence they could not teach well or, at worst impart wrong knowledge which contributes negatively to the quality of students they produce (Yusuf, Ajidadga, Agbonna, &Olumorin, 2010). Fallows and Stevens (2000) also advocated for university-wide initiatives to build employability skills, particularly generic skills, into the higher education curriculum. This will require urgent action, as evidence from the labour market proves that despite all the efforts to improve university education in the past decade, little success has been achieved (Olofintoye & Prince, 2013).

2.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the investigation:
1. What is the impact of different levels of education on the unemployment rates in Nigeria?
2. How does the unemployment rate vary across different age groups in the Nigerian population?
3. Are there gender disparities in access to job opportunities and labour market participation in Nigeria?

4.   Are there disparities in access to job opportunities and labour market participation between urban and rural areas in Nigeria?

3.   METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

This study derives data from a secondary source of Labour Force Statistics: Unemployment and Underemployment Report of Quarter 4 2020, reported in March 2021 by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria. The data were extracted from the national survey posted on the NBS website, which is the most current and latest statistics available on this subject as of 19th June 2023.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using percentage, frequency, and bar charts with Excel software. This made the result presentable and easily interpretable.
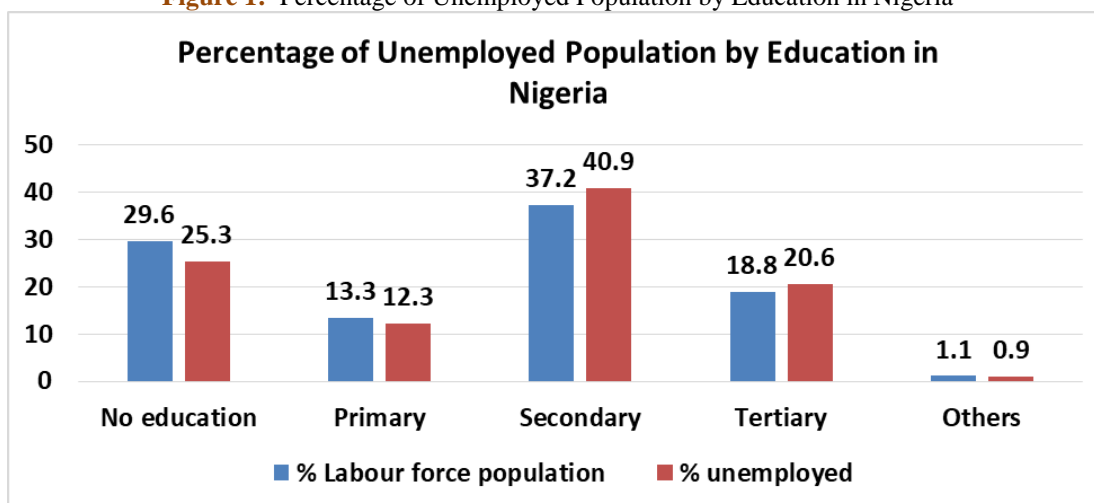
4.   RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is the impact of different levels of education on the unemployment rates in Nigeria?

To answer this research question, Table 1 and Figure 1 present the summary of data on the unemployed population by education in Nigeria

Table 1: Total Number of Labour Force and Unemployed Population by Education in Nigeria

Education	Labour Force Population	%	Total Unemployed	%
No education	20,652,597	29.6	5,860,110	25.3
Primary	9,240,842	13.3	2,851,926	12.3
Secondary	25,942,022	37.2	9,484,027	40.9
Tertiary	13,078,215	18.8	4,773,886	20.6
Others	761,792	1.1	217,441	0.9
Total	69,675,468	100.0	23,187,390	100.0

Figure 1: Percentage of Unemployed Population by Education in Nigeria

Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Table 1 and the accompanying bar chart in Figure 1 show the total labour force and percentage distribution of the unemployed population by education in Nigeria. The results indicate that from a total of 23.2 percent of the unemployed population of Nigeria, 40.9 percent representing 9.4 million of the population with secondary education, were unemployed. This was followed by 25.3 percent representing 5.8 million of the

unemployed population with no education. This indicates that the uneducated population was less likely to be employed. In other words, education plays a significant role in employment as those with higher education (20%) were less likely to be unemployed than those with secondary and no education. In comparison to the international unemployment rate of the population with secondary education (22.9%), Nigeria, with 40.9 percent of unemployed secondary school holders, is far behind in providing employment to its teeming youth population.

Research Question 2: How does the unemployment rate vary across different age groups in the Nigerian population?

To answer this research question, Table 2 and Figure 2 present the summary of data on the unemployed population by age group in Nigeria.

Table 2: Total Number of Labour Force and Unemployed Population by Age-Group Nigeria

Age-Group	Labour Force Population	%	Total Unemployed	%
15-24	9,853,103	14.1	5,259,044	22.7
25-34	20,091,695	28.8	7,464,089	32.2
35-44	19,268,957	27.7	5,232,420	22.6
35-64	20,461,712	29.4	5,231,837	22.6
Total	69,675,467	100.0	23,187,390	100.0

Figure 2: Percentage of Unemployed Population by Age-Group Nigeria
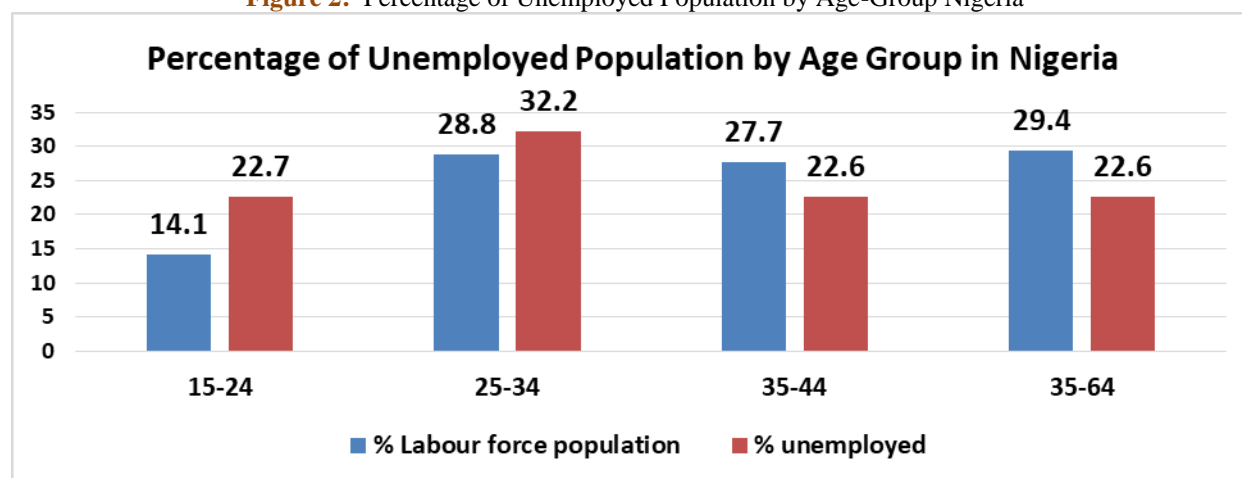
Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Table 2 and the accompanying bar chart in Figure 2 show the total labour force and percentage distribution of the unemployed population by age group in Nigeria. The results reveal that of 23.2 million unemployed in Nigeria, 32.2 percent representing 7.4 million of the population aged 25-34, were unemployed. This age range indicates that most youthful and active populations were unemployed. This was followed by 22.7 percent representing 5.3 million of the unemployed population in the age bracket 15-24. There is a tendency that many in this age range category may be admission seekers into higher education institutions. The least unemployed population of 22.6 percent, representing 5.2 million, is within the age bracket of 45-64. This indicates that age is a strong factor in securing employment as unemployment reduces as age progresses while unemployment is high among the teeming youth population.
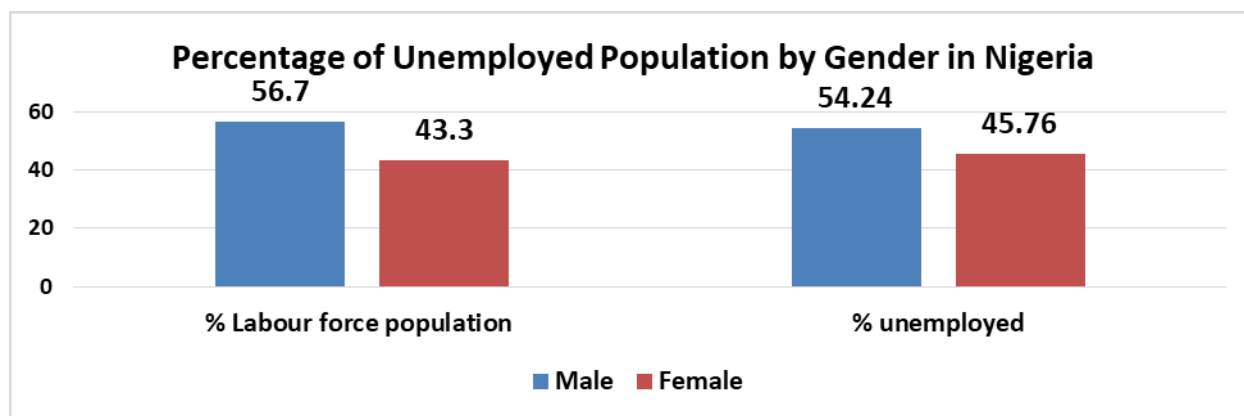
Research Question 3: Are there gender disparities in access to job opportunities and labour market participation in Nigeria?

To answer this research question, Table 3 and Figure 3 present the summary of data on the unemployed population by gender in Nigeria

Table 3: Total Number of Labour Force and Unemployed Population by Gender in Nigeria

Gender	Labour Force Population	%	Total unemployed	%
Male	39,523,050	56.7	12,576,536	54.24
Female	30,152,418	43.3	10,610,854	45.76
Total	69,675,468	100.0	23,187,390	100.00

Figure 3: Percentage of Unemployed Population by Gender in Nigeria

Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Table 3 and the accompanying bar chart in Figure 3 show the total labour force and percentage distribution of the unemployed population by gender in Nigeria. The results show that of 23.2 million unemployed in Nigeria, 54.2 percent representing 12.5 million male population, were unemployed, while 45.8 percent female population was unemployed. This indicates that the male population is less likely to get a job in Nigeria, as shown in the figure of the unemployed population by gender. In other words, more females are getting jobs than males.

Research Question 4: Are there disparities in access to job opportunities and labour market participation between urban and rural areas in Nigeria?

To answer this research question, Table 4 and Figure 4 present the summary of data on the unemployed population by residence in Nigeria

Table 4: Total Number of Labour Force and Unemployed Population by Residence in Nigeria

Place of Residence	Labour Force Population	%	Total unemployed	%
Urban	26,459,732	38.0	8,286,186	35.7
Rural	43,215,736	62.0	14,901,203	64.3
Total	69,675,468	100.0	23,187,389	100.0
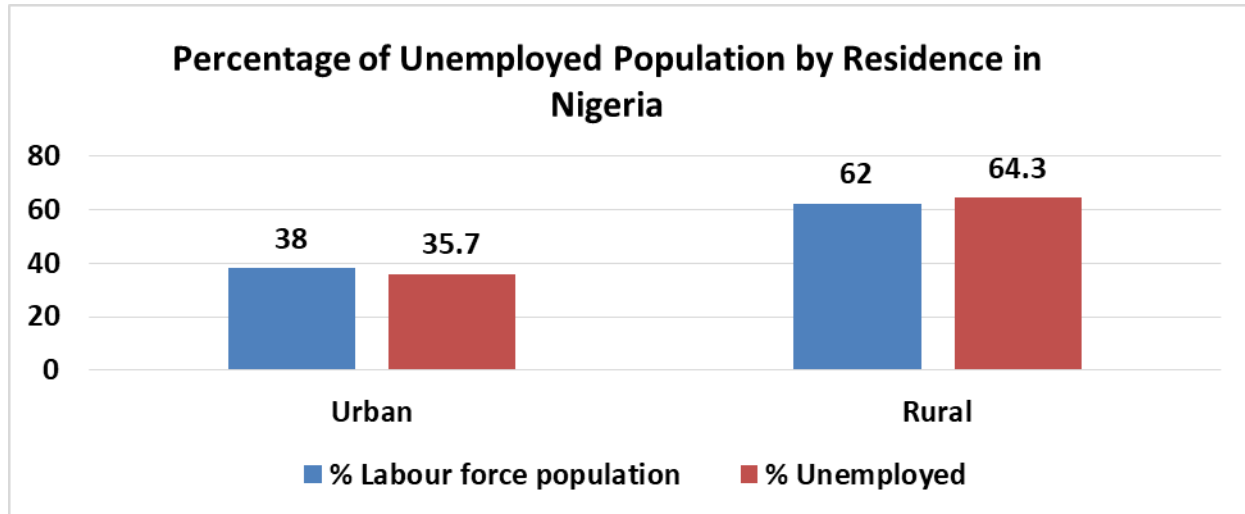
Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Table 4 and the accompanying bar chart in Figure 4 show the total labour force and percentage distribution of the unemployed population by residence in Nigeria. The results indicate that of 23.2 million jobless in Nigeria, 64.3 percent representing 14.9 million rural population, were unemployed. This was followed by 35.7 percent representing 8.2 million of the unemployed population living in urban areas. This indicates that more unemployed people live in rural areas than in cities. The higher unemployment figure in rural areas suggests that rural dwellers are less likely to get job opportunities in rural communities. This will likely drive rural-urban migration and ultimately reduce city job opportunities.

5.   DISCUSSION

The first research question in this study examined the educational factor's contribution to Nigeria's unemployment. The findings showed that individuals with higher education had a lower unemployment rate of 20 percent, suggesting that higher levels of education are associated with better employment prospects. However, individuals with secondary education or no education faced higher unemployment rates. This study's findings agree with Mihaela (2013), who revealed that education plays a fundamental role in reducing unemployment. The unemployment rate decreases as it passes from a lower level of education to a higher level. Education contributes to individual incomes and is correlated with reducing poverty. Ramzan et al. (2018) also agree with the findings of this study in a paper titled 'can education be a Solution to Unemployment?' conducted to determine the impact of education and economic factors on unemployment in Pakistan and found that education exhibits a negative impact on unemployment which means a unit increase in education decrease the unemployment with .06%. Moreover, the findings of this study are also consistent with that of Snieska et al. (2015), who revealed in their study on education and employment in European Union cycles that education level does have a significant influence on unemployment and also posited that the influence varies among countries due to some factors such as historical reasons, labour market structural differences and unemployment insurance system peculiarities.

The second research question is on the impact of age group on the unemployment rate among the Nigerian population. The findings of this study indicate that a significant portion of Nigeria's young and active population is facing unemployment challenges. These findings reveal the importance of age as a critical factor in securing employment, with unemployment rates being highest among the youth population. On the other hand, the lower unemployment rate among individuals aged 45-64 suggests that this age group may benefit from their experience, established networks, and accumulated skills, making them more employable. The findings from this study are consistent with that of Axelrad, Malul, & Israel (2018) and International Labor Office (2011) that the unemployment rate is much higher among youth than that of the adult population in several countries. The position of O'Higgins (2001) also supports this finding that the unemployment rate is higher among young workers than the older population, but the time they spend searching for a job is shorter than that of adults. Similarly, Jacob (2008) agrees that transitioning from school to work is a rather difficult period, and the risk of unemployment is more significant for young people.

The third research question examined the gender disparities in access to job opportunities and labour market participation in Nigeria. The findings show that a higher proportion of the male population in Nigeria is experiencing unemployment compared to females. The data suggests that males are less likely to secure job opportunities in Nigeria, as indicated by the higher percentage of unemployed males, while females seem to have a slightly higher employment rate, as the percentage of unemployed females is lower in comparison. Various factors, such as educational disparities or gender biases in hiring practices, could influence the higher unemployment rate among males. This study's findings align with that of Passinhas & Proença (2019), who found that men are more prone to endure the negative implications of unemployment. However, another study conducted in South Africa starkly contrasts this study's outcomes, revealing that when it comes to gender and employment possibilities, females have a more challenging time finding jobs than men (Nkhumeleni et al., 2022).

The fourth and last research question investigated the disparities in access to job opportunities and labour market participation between urban and rural areas in Nigeria. The findings revealed a significantly higher proportion of unemployed individuals in rural areas than in urban areas. The data suggest that rural residents face greater challenges in securing job opportunities, leading to higher unemployment rates in rural communities. On the other hand, urban areas tend to have a lower percentage of unemployed individuals, indicating relatively better employment prospects for urban dwellers. The higher unemployment rate in rural areas may be attributed to factors such as limited access to education and skills training, lack of diverse industries and job opportunities, underdeveloped infrastructure, and lower investment in rural areas than in urban centers. However, the study by Baah-Boateng (2015) did not agree with the current findings, although it affirmed that rural-urban migration causes unemployment but reported that the unemployment rate is higher in urban than rural areas of Ghana.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the contributions of sociodemographic variables, which include education, age group, gender, and residence) to unemployment rates in Nigeria. The secondary data was extracted and analyzed from the Labour Force Statistics of Unemployment and Underemployment report of the National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria. The study concluded that sociodemographic variables contributed to Nigeria's unemployment rate. Hence, it is recommended that government should ensure that relevant market skills are built into educational curricula. There is also an urgent need for the government at all levels to create programs and policies to enhance academic and vocational training to equip young ones for good living. Lastly, effort should be made to promote opportunities in rural areas to reduce rural-urban migration to the barest minimum.

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