Determinants of Economic Anxiety and Labor Market Exclusion: An Analysis of Yemeni Youth's Perceptions of the Future

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Abstract:

This study examines how economic anxiety, employment exclusion and future expectations intersect among young people in Yemen. Drawing on a national survey of 990 youth respondents aged 16 to 30, the paper analyzes subjective economic status, family economic change, access to money, work participation, job structure, perceived macroeconomic threats, food shortage, poverty fears and personal and societal future expectations. The analysis is motivated by a central puzzle in development economics: how do young people imagine their economic futures when labour markets are weak, household resources are strained and national recovery remains uncertain? The findings reveal a layered vulnerability profile. While 54.8% of respondents describe the current family economic situation as very or rather good, this is notably lower than the 63.4% who described the family situation five years earlier as good. At the personal level, only 45.5% assess their economic situation positively, while 76.1% report having no money personally available. Work participation is sharply gendered: 69.8% of males report being part of the working population compared with only 27.2% of females. Economic anxiety is equally visible in risk perceptions: 60.2% worry very or fairly about becoming poor, 38.6% worry about being forced to leave the country for economic reasons, 47.2% view job losses as important or very important, and 83.1% view food shortage as important or very important. Future expectations show the emotional consequence of this material insecurity: 63.2% are pessimistic about their own future and personal life, and 42.8% are pessimistic about the future of society. By comparing these findings with youth labour-market evidence from Egypt and Syria, the paper contributes to the literature on youth economic vulnerability in fragile and structurally constrained Middle Eastern

economies. It argues that youth economic anxiety in Yemen should be understood not simply as unemployment, but as a wider condition of constrained agency shaped by weak labour-market attachment, liquidity scarcity, household vulnerability and limited confidence in future mobility.

Keywords: youth employment; economic anxiety; Yemen; economic vulnerability; employment exclusion; future expectations; MENA; fragile economies.

1. Introduction

Youth economic vulnerability has become one of the defining development challenges of the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. The region combines a large youth population with persistent labour-market rigidities, high levels of informality, gendered barriers to employment, and repeated political and economic shocks. Although global youth unemployment has improved relative to the peak pandemic period, the recovery has been uneven. The International Labour Organization reports that the MENA youth unemployment rate remained 24.4% in 2023, almost twice the global average, underscoring the structural character of youth exclusion in the region (ILO, 2024). In fragile economies, unemployment is only one part of a broader economic problem. Young people also confront weak household purchasing power, food insecurity, unstable income, difficulty accessing money, dependence on family support, and uncertainty regarding the future value of education and skills.

Yemen represents an especially important case for understanding youth economic anxiety under severe economic stress. The country has experienced prolonged conflict, public-sector fragmentation, disruption of oil exports and trade, currency pressures, deterioration of services, and sharp declines in household welfare. Recent World Bank analysis describes Yemen's economy as continuing to face severe strain, with persistent macroeconomic fragmentation and deteriorating living conditions affecting welfare and development outcomes (World Bank, 2025, 2026). For young people, these economic conditions matter not only because they affect current consumption, but because they shape expectations about work, marriage, migration, education, entrepreneurship and social mobility.

This paper focuses on youth aged 16 to 30, a life stage in which economic transitions are particularly consequential. In many settings, this is the period when individuals finish schooling, enter the labour market, begin independent earning, form households, and develop expectations about future mobility. In Yemen, these transitions are increasingly compressed by crisis conditions. A young person may be formally educated but unable to find stable employment, willing to work but constrained by family responsibilities, insecurity or lack of transport; motivated to start a business but without access to credit; or optimistic at the level of

personal ability but pessimistic about the national economy. These contradictions make Yemen an analytically powerful context for studying how economic vulnerability is experienced subjectively.

The paper asks three research questions:

First, what do Yemeni youth report about their personal and family economic situations?

Second, how do work participation, access to money and economic risk perceptions differ across gender, age and education groups?

Third, how are economic conditions reflected in personal and societal future expectations?

The study answers these questions using descriptive and comparative analysis of national youth survey data. The approach is deliberately empirical and policy-oriented, rather than treating youth unemployment as a single indicator, it uses a wider set of economic perception and security measures to capture the lived economy of young people.

The contribution is threefold. Theoretically, the paper extends the economic vulnerability literature by linking labour-market exclusion to subjective future expectations in a fragile economy. Empirically, it provides a detailed youth-focused analysis of Yemen, a country that remains underrepresented in comparative youth employment scholarship despite the severity of its economic crisis. Comparatively, it situates Yemen alongside Egypt and Syria, two cases that illuminate different forms of youth economic exclusion. **The comparison is made with Egypt and Syria because Yemen has homogenous characteristics with these two countries to some extent**. Egypt as a structurally constrained but non-war labour market, and Syria as a conflict-affected economy marked by displacement, informality and reconstruction uncertainty. This comparison clarifies what is distinctive about Yemen, the simultaneous presence of weak labour-market attachment, liquidity scarcity, food-related vulnerability and deep pessimism about personal mobility.

2. Literature Review and Contextual Background

2.1 Youth economic anxiety and the transition to work

The transition from education to work is a central theme in youth studies and development economics. Human capital theory argues that education and skill acquisition should increase productivity and earnings potential (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974). Yet in many MENA economies, educational attainment does not automatically translate into stable employment. Labour-market segmentation, credential inflation, public-sector queuing and weak private-sector absorption can produce a gap between educational expectation and

occupational reality (Assaad & Krafft, 2016; Barsoum, 2016; ILO, 2024). Economic anxiety emerges when young people perceive that the expected returns to schooling, effort and ambition are uncertain.

The capability approach provides a useful lens for this problem because it shifts attention from income alone to the real freedoms young people have to pursue valued lives (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). A young person may be nominally educated or even employed, but still lack the capability to plan for the future if income is irregular, social protection is weak, food prices are high, or mobility is constrained. In this sense, economic anxiety is not simply a psychological state; it is an adaptive response to constrained opportunity structures.

2.2 Yemen: economic fragility and youth livelihoods

Yemen's economic context is characterized by overlapping macroeconomic, institutional and household-level shocks. The World Bank's Yemen Economic Monitor emphasizes continuing economic strain, including reduced fiscal space, the blockade of oil exports in areas controlled by the internationally recognized government, macroeconomic fragmentation and growing pressure on welfare indicators (World Bank, 2025, 2026). Poverty and food insecurity are not isolated humanitarian concerns; they are linked to labour-market weakness, reduced purchasing power and the erosion of livelihood systems. The World Food Programme similarly highlights the way economic crisis and weakened services deplete household assets and livelihoods (WFP, 2025).

Youth are exposed to these pressures in distinctive ways. They are less likely than older cohorts to have accumulated assets, secure employment histories or social protection. They also face transition costs: job search, transport, communication, training, marriage expenses and migration decisions all require resources. When personal liquidity is absent, even motivated youth may be unable to convert aspiration into action. The present study therefore treats access to money as an important economic variable rather than a minor consumption indicator.

2.3 Egypt as a structural labour-market comparison

Egypt offers a useful comparison because its youth employment problem is structural rather than primarily conflict-driven. Egyptian youth have long faced delayed labour-market entry, high unemployment among educated youth and women, and skills mismatch between schooling and private-sector demand (Assaad & Krafft, 2016; Barsoum, 2016). Recent ILO and ESCWA analyses continue to emphasize unemployment among youth and women, skills mismatch, and the need for stronger transitions from education to work (ILO, 2024; ESCWA, 2024). In Egypt, economic anxiety often reflects the mismatch between educational aspiration and labour-market absorption. In Yemen, by contrast, the same mismatch is compounded by conflict fragility, liquidity scarcity and food insecurity.

The comparison with Egypt matters because it prevents the Yemeni case from being interpreted solely as a conflict anomaly. Many youth labour-market problems in Yemen have regional parallels: weak private-sector job creation, gendered exclusion, informality and dependence on family support. What distinguishes Yemen is the severity and simultaneity of these pressures.

2.4 Syria as a conflict-economy comparison

Syria provides a second comparative frame because it shows how conflict transforms youth economic trajectories through displacement, disrupted schooling, informality, emigration and fragmented local economies (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2022). In conflict economies, youth employment is not only about job vacancies; it is about safety, mobility, documentation, skills erosion, family separation and the reconstruction of local markets. Syrian youth evidence shows that prolonged conflict can produce both economic necessity and migration aspiration, as young people seek pathways around blocked local opportunity structures.

Yemen shares several of these conflict-economy characteristics, but it also has its own economic profile. The survey evidence in this paper suggests that food shortage, poverty anxiety and lack of personal money are central to the Yemeni youth experience. This indicates that labour-market exclusion is embedded within a wider household survival economy.

2.5 Future expectations as an economic outcome

Future expectations are increasingly recognized as economically meaningful. Expectations shape job search intensity, educational investment, entrepreneurship, migration decisions and tolerance for delayed rewards (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006). In fragile settings, pessimistic expectations may become self-reinforcing: if young people do not believe that effort will lead to mobility, they may reduce investment in education, accept low-quality work, or prioritize exit over local economic participation. Conversely, credible labour-market pathways can strengthen optimism and agency.

This paper treats future expectations as a dependent social-economic outcome. The main argument is that economic anxiety among Yemeni youth is visible not only in reported poverty fears or employment status, but in the way youth imagine their own futures and the future of society.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study integrates three theoretical perspectives. First, human capital theory suggests that education and skills increase economic potential, but only when labour markets have the capacity to absorb trained youth. In fragile economies, the expected return on human capital may be weakened by market disruption, insecurity and limited private-sector demand.

Second, labour-market segmentation theory explains why young people can be concentrated in insecure, informal or unpaid work despite willingness to participate economically. Segmentation is especially relevant in Yemen because formal employment opportunities are limited and because gender norms and household responsibilities shape access to work.

Third, the capability approach conceptualizes economic vulnerability as constrained agency. A young person with no personal money, uncertain access to work and pessimistic expectations has fewer effective choices even when formal rights or aspirations exist. The analytical framework therefore links four blocks: (1) family and personal economic situation; (2) employment and liquidity access; (3) economic risk perceptions; and (4) future expectations.

Table 1. Analytical framework linking economic anxiety to future expectations

Stage	Observed indicators	Expected interpretation
Economic context	Family economic situation; personal economic situation; national crisis salience	Defines the pressure environment
Labour-market attachment	Working-population status; job type; job-loss concern	Indicates access to income-generating roles
Household and personal liquidity	Availability of personal money; dependence on family/other sources	Determines ability to search, train or invest
Economic risk perception	Poverty fear; food shortage; forced economic migration	Captures anticipatory insecurity
Future expectations	Personal future; society future; career prospects	Reflects perceived economic mobility

4. Methodology

The study uses a quantitative survey design based on youth responses in Yemen. The analytical sample consists of 990 respondents aged 16 to 30. The data include gender, age, education and household characteristics as well as a wide set of economic perception, employment and future-expectation variables. The analysis focuses only on variables that directly capture economic status, work participation, access to money, poverty fears, food shortage, job-loss concerns, national economic crisis perceptions, career disruption and future outlook.

The method is descriptive and comparative. Descriptive analysis is appropriate because the objective is to map the structure of economic anxiety rather than estimate causal effects. Percentages are used for categorical variables, and mean scores are used for 0-10 security and future-orientation indicators. Cross-tabulations by gender, age and education are used to identify subgroup differences. To strengthen interpretation, findings are discussed against the broader literature on youth economic vulnerability in Yemen, Egypt and Syria.

The analysis follows three principles. First, it avoids overclaiming causality because the survey is cross-sectional. Second, it treats subjective economic indicators as substantively meaningful because perceptions influence behavior, expectations and agency. Third, it interprets youth economic anxiety as multidimensional: employment status, access to money, food shortage, poverty fear and future pessimism are examined together rather than separately.

Table 2. Respondent profile

Characteristic	Weighted % / N
Sample size	990.0
Gender: male	50.7
Gender: female	49.3
Age group: 16-20	31.5
Age group: 21-25	37.6
Age group: 26-30	30.9
Education: low	17.3
Education: middle	51.4
Education: high	31.3

Note. Sample profile is reported from the weighted survey structure and age bands used in the workbook.

5. Results

5.1 Subjective economic security and family economic decline

The first result is that youth economic vulnerability appears simultaneously at the family and personal levels. A slight majority of respondents (54.8%) describe their family economic situation today as very or rather good. However, the share reporting a good family situation five years ago was higher (63.4%), suggesting perceived deterioration in household economic standing. At the personal level, only 45.5% assess their

current economic situation positively, while 54.5% describe it as rather or very bad. This gap between family-level and personal-level economic assessment indicates that young people may be partly cushioned by household support while still experiencing weak individual economic agency.

Table 3. Family and personal economic situation indicators

Indicator	Percent
Family good today	54.8
Family bad today	45.2
Family good five years ago	63.4
Family bad five years ago	33.5
Personal good today	45.5
Personal bad today	54.5

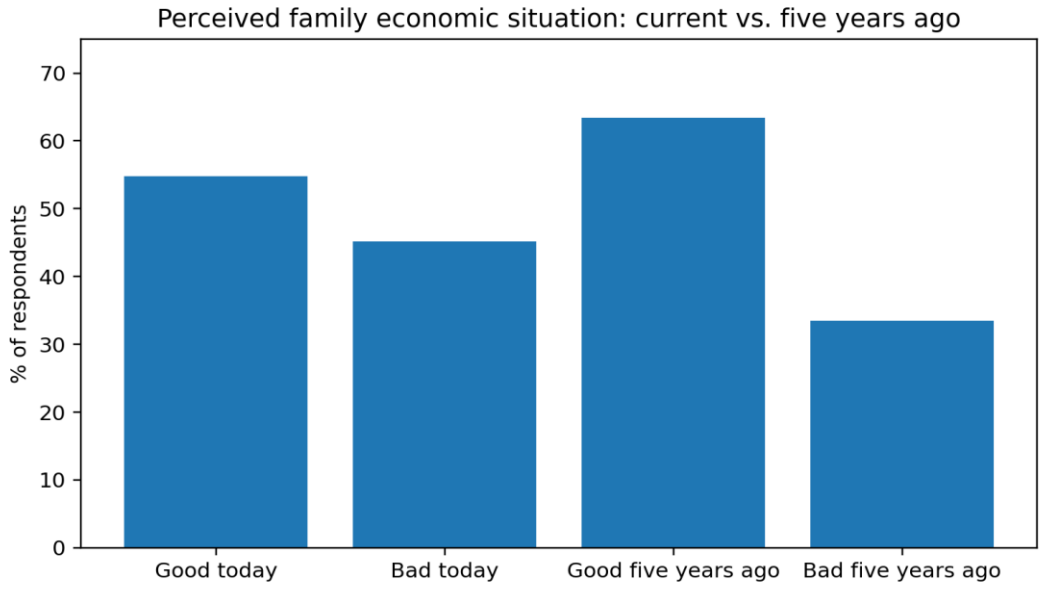

Figure 1. Perceived family economic situation: current versus five years ago.

Table 4. Mean scores for economic security and future-orientation indicators

Indicator	Total	Male	Female	Age 16-20	Age 21-25	Age 26-30
My economic situation	4.9	4.6	5.2	5.2	4.9	4.5
My access to food	6.2	6.2	6.3	6.5	6.3	5.8
The future of	6.1	6.0	6.1	6.4	5.9	5.8

my family						
My future professional career	5.6	5.2	6.0	5.9	5.7	5.3

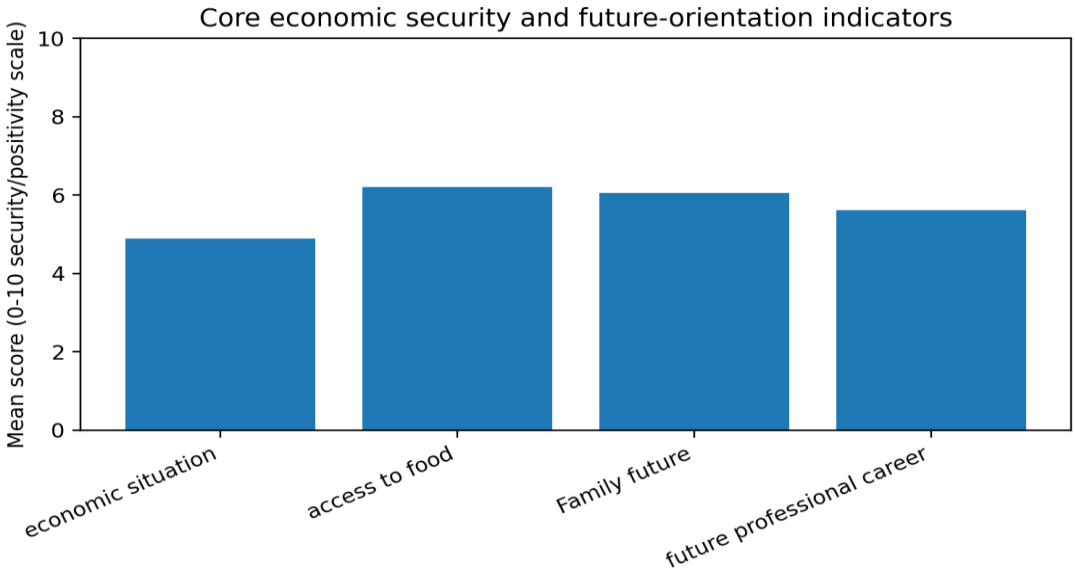

Figure 2. Core economic security and future-orientation indicators.

5.2 Employment exclusion and gendered labour-market attachment

Employment exclusion is one of the strongest patterns in the survey. Overall, 48.8% of youth identify as part of the working population. The gender gap is substantial: 69.8% of males report working-population attachment compared with only 27.2% of females. This does not simply reflect individual preference; it reflects a wider structure of gendered access to employment, mobility, family expectations and labour-market demand. The finding is consistent with regional evidence from MENA, where young women often face lower labour-force participation even when educational attainment improves.

Table 5. Work participation and access to personal money

Indicator	Percent
Economically active/working: total	48.8
Economically active/working: male	69.8
Economically active/working: female	27.2
No personal money available: total	76.1
No personal money available: male	75.3
No personal money available: female	77.0

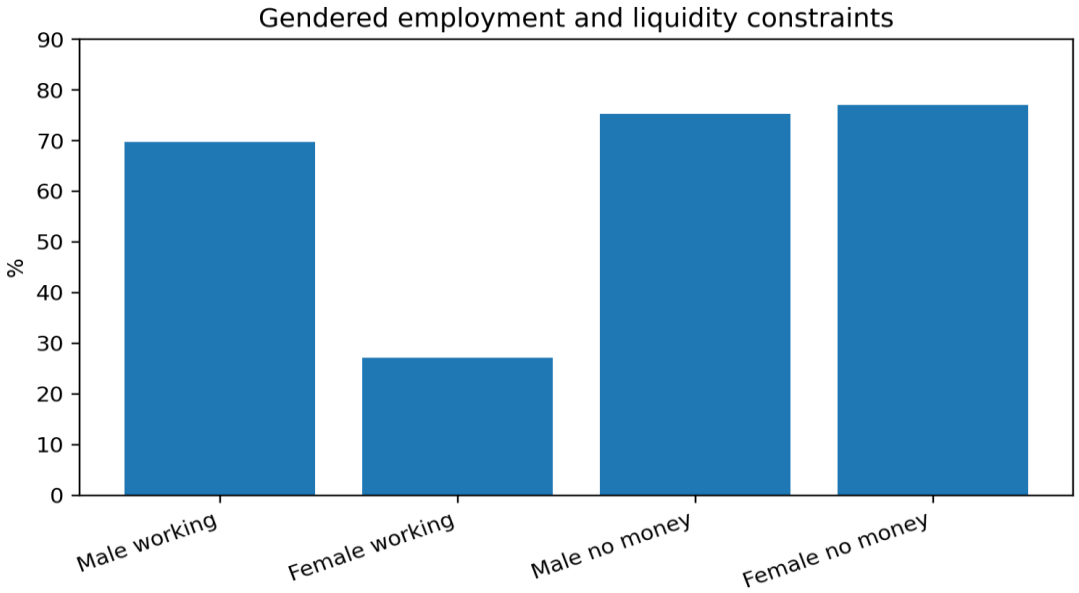

Figure 3. Gendered employment and liquidity constraints.

Table 6. Main job structure among youth who work for income (top categories)

Response	Total	Male	Female
Day laborer (unstable employment, unstable income)	24.8	32.2	9.5
Worker (no insurance, but continuous employment)	16.2	11.9	25.2
Self employed in service sector (continuous work, unstable income)	12.8	10.9	16.6
Self employed without higher education (trade, commerce, industry, etc.)	9.6	14.2	0.0
State employee	7.5	3.7	15.4
Self employed in agriculture	7.3	10.9	0.0
Other	7.3	3.3	15.4
Employee (with insurance)	6.2	4.7	9.3

Note. Percentages are reported among respondents to the job-type question, categories reflect the workbook response labels.

5.3 Liquidity scarcity and limited economic agency

The clearest sign of constrained economic agency is personal liquidity. More than three quarters of youth (76.1%) report that they do not personally have money available from work, family or other sources. This is analytically important because access to small amounts of money can determine whether youth can search for jobs, pay transport costs, maintain phone communication, participate in training, or start micro-enterprises. In fragile labour markets, liquidity scarcity can therefore transform unemployment into a broader capability constraint.

5.4 Poverty anxiety, food shortage and macroeconomic threat perception

Economic anxiety is strongly visible in risk perceptions. A majority of respondents (60.2%) report being very or fairly worried about becoming poor. Food shortage is even more salient: 83.1% describe it as important or very important. The national economic crisis is also highly salient, with 80.0% rating it as rather or very important. These figures indicate that Yemeni youth experience economic insecurity as a system-level condition that connects poverty, food access and national recovery. Employment is therefore not only a labour-market issue; it is inseparable from household welfare and food affordability.

Table 7. Economic fears and national economic risks by gender

Risk indicator	Total %	Male %	Female %
Becoming poor: very/fairly worried	60.2	59.9	60.6
Forced migration for economic reasons: very/fairly worried	38.6	52.2	24.6
Job losses: important/very important issue	47.2	61.1	33.0
Food shortage: important/very important issue	83.1	82.2	84.0
National economic crisis: rather/very important	80.0	83.4	76.5

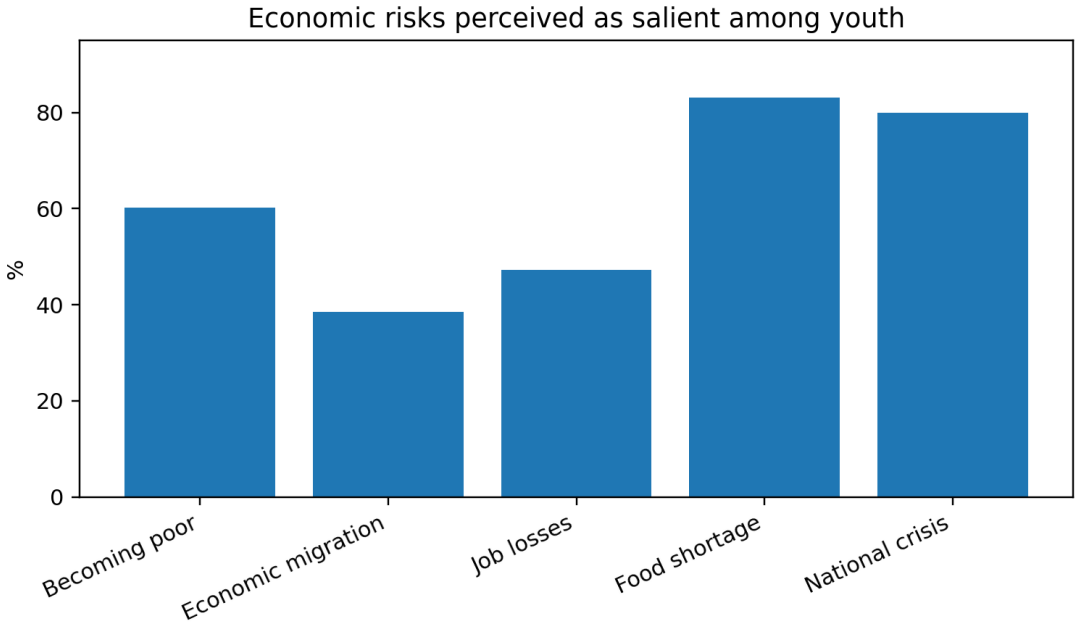

Figure 4. Economic risks perceived as salient among youth.

5.5 Career shock and future expectations

The survey further shows that career expectations are fragile. 43.6% agree that their personal career opportunities were substantially reduced due to the pandemic, while the mean score for future professional career is only 5.62 on the 0-10 scale. Pessimism is strongest at the level of personal future: 63.2% perceive their own future and personal life pessimistically, compared with only 10.8% who are optimistic. Societal future expectations are less negative but still weak: 42.8% are pessimistic about the future of society.

Table 8. Future expectations by gender

Future expectation	Total %	Male %	Female %
Personal future pessimistic	63.2	66.1	60.3
Personal future optimistic	10.8	9.5	12.2
Personal future mixed	25.9	24.4	27.5
Societal future pessimistic	42.8	48.2	37.2
Societal future optimistic	20.8	19.8	21.8
Societal future mixed	36.4	32.0	41.0

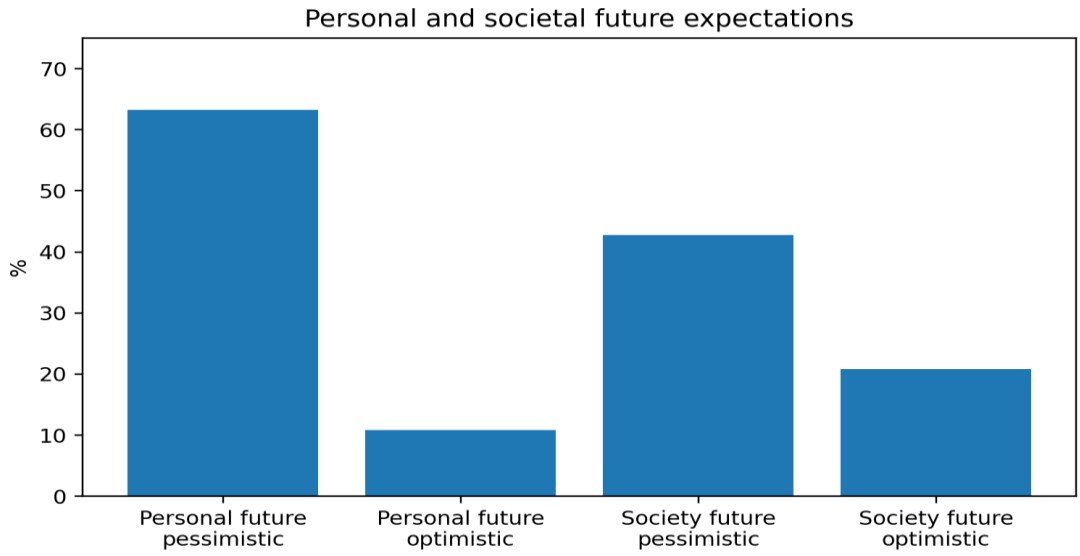

Figure 5. Personal and societal future expectations.

5.6 Comparative interpretation: Yemen, Egypt and Syria

The Yemeni findings align with wider MENA evidence, but they also reveal a more severe vulnerability profile. Egypt demonstrates how youth unemployment and skills mismatch can persist even in a relatively more institutionally stable economy. Syria demonstrates how conflict reshapes youth livelihoods through displacement, informality and migration pressure. Yemen combines aspects of both: structural youth employment weakness and conflict-related economic fragility. However, the high shares reporting no personal money and strong food-shortage concern suggest that youth vulnerability in Yemen is especially connected to household survival and liquidity scarcity.

Table 9. Comparative interpretation: Yemen, Egypt and Syria

Dimension	Yemen	Egypt	Syria
Conflict/economic shock	Conflict-fragility, market disruption, food insecurity, liquidity constraints	Macro reform pressures and inflation amid non-war structural transition	War economy, displacement, capital destruction and fragmented labour markets
Labour-market problem	Low work participation, high dependence, weak income security	High youth and female unemployment; skills mismatch and public-sector expectations	Informality, migration, skills erosion, disrupted schooling/employment

Youth transition risk	Economic anxiety and pessimistic expectations constrain mobility	Educated youth face delayed entry and credential mismatch	Youth face displacement, emigration pressure and weakened future planning
Policy priority	Emergency livelihoods, SME recovery, cash-for-work, market access	Vocational reform, private-sector job creation, female employment	Reconstruction jobs, returnee integration, skills rebuilding

6. Discussion

The findings support the argument that youth economic anxiety in Yemen is multidimensional. It cannot be reduced to open unemployment or to pessimism alone. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of labour-market exclusion, weak personal liquidity, household economic pressure, poverty fear, food shortage and limited confidence in future professional mobility. The survey shows that nearly half of respondents are attached to work, yet three quarters report no personal money available. This suggests that work participation, where it exists, may not necessarily translate into secure or autonomous economic agency.

The gender pattern is particularly important. The male-female work participation gap is large, with male youth much more likely to report being part of the working population. This finding is consistent with MENA labour-market research showing that young women face layered constraints, including restricted mobility, employer preferences, unpaid care responsibilities and limited availability of acceptable jobs. In Yemen, these constraints operate within a fragile economy where even male employment is often insecure. Policy must therefore avoid assuming that general job creation automatically reaches young women.

The comparison with Egypt highlights the difference between structural labour-market exclusion and conflict-fragility exclusion. Egypt's youth employment problem is often explained by skills mismatch, public-sector expectations, credential inflation and private-sector absorption limits. Yemen shares some of these structural features, but its youth experience is more deeply shaped by macroeconomic breakdown and household welfare pressure. The comparison with Syria shows the conflict dimension: both countries demonstrate how war and displacement weaken labour-market pathways and future planning. Yet Yemen's strong food-shortage signal indicates that labour-market policy must be connected to food systems, local production and household purchasing power.

The findings also have implications for theories of youth transition. Standard transition models assume a relatively sequential movement from education to work and then to independent adulthood. In Yemen, the

sequence is disrupted. Young people may be adults in terms of responsibilities but economically dependent; they may be willing to work but not able to secure stable income; they may value education but doubt its economic return. This produces what may be called blocked economic adulthood: a state in which youth possess aspirations but lack the economic conditions required to convert them into life-course progress.

Future expectations are therefore not simply attitudes. They are economic indicators. When 63.2% of youth are pessimistic about their own future, the result signals a perceived weakness in mobility pathways. Persistent pessimism can reduce education investment, weaken entrepreneurship, increase migration pressure and lower trust in local recovery. Conversely, even modest improvements in credible work pathways, personal liquidity, apprenticeships and small enterprise support may produce psychological as well as economic returns.

7. Policy Implications

The policy implications are clear. Youth employment policy in Yemen should not be designed as a narrow unemployment programme. It should combine livelihood creation, liquidity support, skills-to-work transitions, food-market stabilization and gender-sensitive access to jobs. Table 10 translates the main empirical findings into policy interventions.

Table 10. Policy implications matrix

Finding	Policy interpretation	Recommended intervention
Only 48.8% report being part of the working population	The youth labour-market attachment is fragile and gendered.	Wage-employment schemes linked to private firms and local value chains.
76.1% report no personal money available	Liquidity constraints reduce job search, training and entrepreneurship options.	Small cash grants, transport subsidies and digital-payment access for youth.
60.2% worry very/fairly about becoming poor	Economic vulnerability is not episodic; it is a central life concern.	Social protection linked to skills and income-generation pathways.
83.1% rate food shortage as important/very important	Food affordability is an economic outcome, not only a humanitarian issue.	Food-market stabilization, local production support and targeted transfers.
63.2% are pessimistic about personal future	Economic pessimism may reduce investment in education and productive risk-taking.	Career counselling, apprenticeship pathways and credible youth enterprise support.

First, youth employment programmes should prioritize quick income pathways linked to local value chains. Cash-for-work can provide short-term relief, but it should be connected to skills certification, private-sector partnerships and local production. Second, youth liquidity constraints require low-cost interventions such as transport stipends, phone-data support for job search, micro-grants and digital payment access. Third, female youth employment needs targeted design, including safe transport, home-based enterprise channels, flexible training schedules and employer incentives.

Fourth, food shortage should be treated as an economic policy issue. Strengthening local food production, reducing market bottlenecks and targeting transfers to vulnerable youth households can indirectly support labour-market participation by reducing survival pressure. Fifth, career pessimism should be addressed through credible pathways: apprenticeships, vocational education linked to employers, entrepreneurship mentoring and transparent information about sectors with real demand.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The study is cross-sectional and therefore cannot establish causal relationships between economic conditions and future expectations. The findings should be interpreted as evidence of association and pattern rather than causal direction. Future research should use longitudinal data to examine whether improvements in employment, income access or household economic conditions lead to measurable changes in youth optimism and economic behavior.

Future studies should also combine survey evidence with qualitative interviews. Interviews would help explain why some youth remain optimistic despite hardship, how gender norms affect employment decisions, and how youth evaluate migration, entrepreneurship and informal work. Comparative microdata from Yemen, Egypt and Syria would further strengthen regional theory building on youth economic vulnerability in fragile and constrained economies.

9. Conclusion

This paper examined economic anxiety, employment exclusion and future expectations among Yemeni youth. The results show that youth vulnerability in Yemen is not limited to unemployment, it is a wider condition shaped by personal liquidity scarcity, family economic deterioration, poverty anxiety, food shortage, weak career confidence and pessimistic future expectations. The central empirical message is that young people's economic lives are constrained not only by the absence of jobs, but by the absence of reliable pathways from aspiration to economic agency. By comparing Yemen with Egypt and Syria, the paper shows that Yemeni youth share regional challenges of skills mismatch and labour-market exclusion while also facing a more severe fragility environment. Policies that seek to support youth must therefore integrate

employment, livelihoods, food security, gender inclusion and future-oriented capability building. In a country where youth are central to social recovery, rebuilding economic confidence is not a secondary development objective; it is a foundation for long-term stability and human development. In general, the main reasons of the catastrophic situation in Yemen may be summarized as follows :

1. Unemployment, which reflects the broader situation in Yemen due to various factors—most notably the political circumstances the country has endured for over two decades.

2. Shortages of food and medicine.

3. Widespread poverty.

4. A lack of liquidity and weak economic investment and development projects, among other causes.

Disclaimer

The article has not been previously presented or published and is not part of a thesis project.

Conflict of Interest

There are no financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest to declare.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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