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► The role of social protection and employment promotion as viewed by the young people of Uzbekistan

Rapid poll results



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► Background

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) as one of the implementors of the United Nations Joint Programme on Strengthening Social Protection in Uzbekistan is partnering with the Government of Uzbekistan in drafting the national strategy for social protection. Inclusiveness and multistakeholder engagement are among the main principles followed in devising the strategy. The participation of the social partners and civil society organisations representing different social groups and their interests is crucial for ensuring that the various transitions people may face during their lifespans are fully recognized and responded to by social protection policy. These may be lifecycle transitions in which social protection could ensure that young women and men are able to successfully manage the change from education to work; that families can cope with caring for young children; that the working-age population can make transitions between jobs and sectors; and that people can retire and live in dignity. Social protection should also address systemic transitions – especially the challenges in moving from highly informal and underregulated forms of employment and economic units to a formal economy, as well finding decent work in green, care-giving and digital economic sectors, and providing sustainable forms of financing.

The opinions, experiences and aspirations of young people are particularly important, as the policies formulated now will affect both their current situation and their future. Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia, is home to 35.2 million people, 18 million of whom are under the age of 29, and that is the highest absolute number of young people in Europe and Central Asia (World Bank, 2021). High demographic dividends will follow from a proper mix of policies that create decent jobs and mobilise labour resources while offering social protection measures that address transitions in order to avert or mitigate the insecurities that young people face.

► **Global statistics include stark evidence of the impact of the pandemic on employment in general and on different groups of workers:**

...global employment in 2020 declined more for women, youth, and the medium- and low-skilled... . Women were disproportionately affected, accounting for 38.9

per cent of total employment before the COVID-19 crisis (2019) but making up 47.6 per cent of employment losses in 2020. Even starker is the disproportionate impact on youth who represented just 13 per cent of total employment in 2019, but made up 34.2 per cent of the 2020 decline in employment.¹

¹ ILO Monitor: Covid and the World of Work. Eighth Edition. Available online at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-and-responses/WCMS_824092/lang-en/index.htm

► A large survey undertaken by UNICEF in 2019 looked into the aspirations of some 4,500 young people aged 15-29, who indicate that their primary concern, ranking far above anything else, is “finding a good job”.² This is not surprising given that diverse data show that:

More than half of all youth in their twenties have left education, but have yet to find a job. Easing the transition from education to employment for youth stand out as a the singularly most important challenge for achieving broad-based and inclusive participation

of all in the economic development through productive employment and decent work. Far too many, in particular young women, fall by the wayside in the transition from education to employment. The reasons are manyfold... . Therefore, sustained efforts are required on many fronts to enable youth to make the transition from education to employment much more easily. Such efforts will invariably need to have a strong focus on those facing the greatest difficulties, e.g., young women, rural youth and youth from economically disadvantaged households.³

The Government of Uzbekistan is working on different fronts to improve the situation of young people – notably in education, employment, housing, social protection, and participation in society. Access to decent jobs is addressed in Uzbekistan’s draft employment programme, while its draft social protection strategy focuses on measures to improve coordination between social protection and employment services for various disadvantaged groups including young women, young persons with disabilities and those living in disadvantaged households and regions. A number of interventions were introduced to improve administrative processes and interventions at the local level. For example, in 2020 the Youth Notebook was introduced to identify unemployed youth between 18 and 30 years of age and to design suitable responses that would lead to their employment. In January 2022, the mahallas, a traditional community institution, introduced the post of Youth Leader. One of the main responsibilities of these Youth Leaders is to monitor the challenges that young people are facing and provide them with the support needed to overcome them.

Seeking young people’s views on social protection and their expectations from the system are one of the ways to engage with them and offer them an opportunity to shape public policies. This aspiration was voiced by young people in UNICEF’s 2020 nationwide survey which stressed that “...they consider it essential that a serious interest in youth life-experience and a proactive engagement with youth emerges.”⁴ It is hoped that the experiences with social protection and promotion of employment revealed in this rapid poll will inform the content of social protection and employment measures and contribute to further inclusion of young people in the processes through which policies are defined, implemented and monitored.

2 UNICEF 2020, Youth of Uzbekistan: Challenges and Prospects (Tashkent, 2020), p. 107. “Inability to find a decent job” was stated to be one of their three most serious concerns by 45 per cent of youth aged 15-30 in a large survey of 4,500 youth in 2019.

3 Towards Full and Productive Employment in Uzbekistan: Achievements and Challenges, p.26. Available online at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-moscow/documents/publication/wcms_782059.pdf.

4 UNICEF 2020, Youth of Uzbekistan: Challenges and Prospects, p.98. Available online at: <https://www.unicef.org/uzbekistan/media/3541/file/Youth%20of%20Uzbekistan-%20Challenges%20and%20Prospects.pdf>.

► Methodology of the poll

The poll was conducted on the U-Report platform that was developed by UNICEF and is managed with the national partners in order to engage youth in decision-making. In Uzbekistan, U-Report runs on the Telegram mobile messenger platform due to its popularity, but polls are also conducted on Facebook and via SMS. The U-Report messenger bot connects more than 226,000 young users, and the student population is the most likely to respond to polls conducted on the platform. U-Report is currently the only comprehensive youth platform in Uzbekistan for quickly ascertaining the opinions and attitudes of young people throughout the country.

Polls conducted on this platform should not be considered truly representative due to the limitations in the sampling technique. However, these polls do provide a picture of the general trends and attitudes among Uzbek youth.

This poll was designed to show how young people perceive social protection and promotion of employment. More than 14,000 respondents began the questionnaire, while 8,708 answered at least half of the questions. This report presents the responses of those who answered at least half the questions. The first half of the poll (4 questions) covered social protection and young people's perception of it. The second half (3 questions) asked employment-related questions. The poll was limited to seven questions because of the age of the targeted respondents and the online nature of the poll.

Demographics of the poll

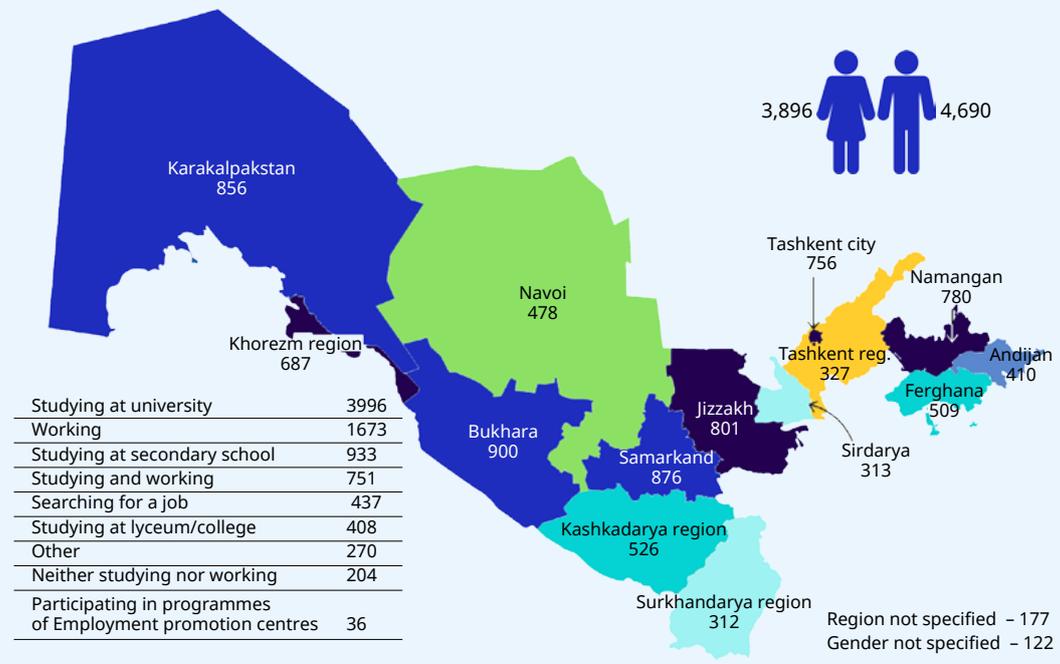
The poll was conducted in all of Uzbekistan's regions. The percentages of respondents from Samarkand, Bukhara, and the Republic of Karakalpakstan each came to 10% of the total and were higher than the participation from other regions. The lowest levels of participation were registered in the Surkhandarya, Sirdarya and Tashkent regions (4% in each region). Male respondents made up 54% of the total.

A 70% majority of respondents were studying at a school, college or university, while 8.6% of respondents were both studying and working; 19.2% of respondents were employed and 7.4% unemployed. Among the unemployed were jobseekers (5% of all respondents) and young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) who accounted for 2.3% of the total. Only 0.5% of respondents were participating in programmes to promote employment such as public works programmes and active labour market programmes.

Close to 20% of respondents did not answer the question regarding their age. The data on age also contained errors and inaccurately entered numbers. Therefore, no cross-tabulations of findings among age cohorts were done.

4 UNICEF 2020, Youth of Uzbekistan: Challenges and Prospects, стр. 98. Доступно по ссылке: <https://www.unicef.org/uzbekistan/media/3541/file/Youth%20of%20Uzbekistan-%20Challenges%20and%20Prospects.pdf>.

► Figure 1. Demographics of the poll



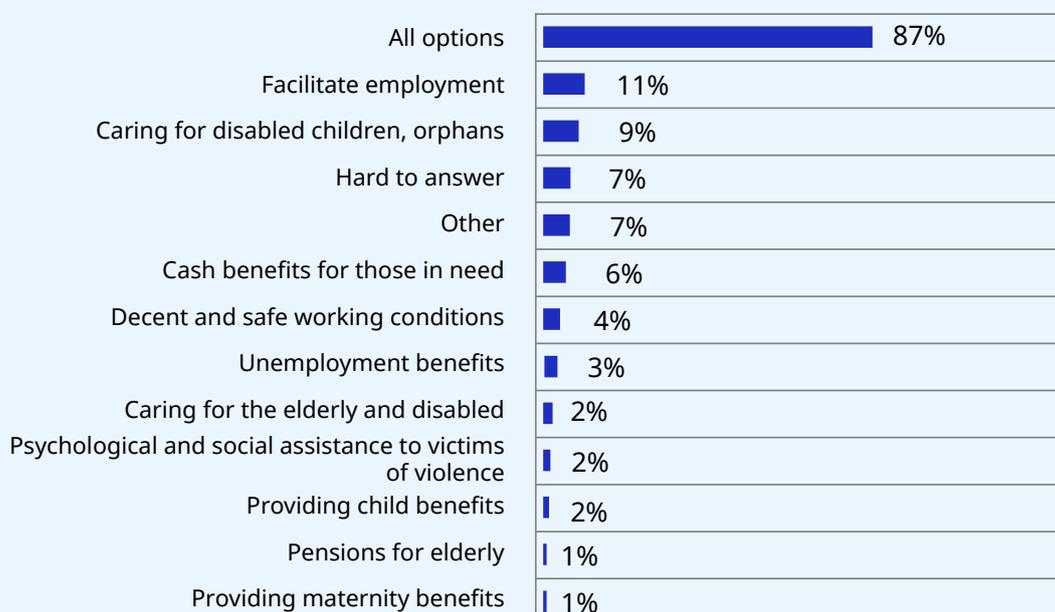
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► Social protection

In 2021 a total of 48 social protection schemes were offered in Uzbekistan. Social protection expenditures have been decreasing as a percentage of GDP in recent years, and in 2020 about 7% of GDP (excluding healthcare) was invested for this purpose. The greatest share of the social protection budget at 85.6% was allocated to social insurance programmes, 7.5% to social assistance programmes, 5.4% to social care services, and 1.5% to labour market programmes. Despite a slight increase in the number of recipients of social protection, its coverage has also decreased. In response to COVID-19, the government’s 2020 budget provided greater financing of healthcare and social assistance as well as more public investment. For example, the number of households receiving social assistance nearly doubled. Nevertheless, government spending on the entire social protection system – specifically, pensions, social assistance, social care services and labour market programmes – has remained relatively modest.

Therefore, the first question in the poll intended was designed to assess how aware young people are about the components or functions of social protection.

► **Figure 2. What constitutes social protection?**
 % of each category in the total number of responses⁵



⁵ The respondents had an opportunity to select multiple options by selecting the option “Other” first. More than 26% of the respondents selected this option, and a majority of them chose multiple categories from the list provided. Therefore, the total number of selected answers (12,430) for this question exceeds the total number of respondents (8,708).

Out of 8,708 respondents, 87% believe that social protection consists of a myriad of cash benefits programmes for children, persons with disabilities, the unemployed; benefits for maternity and childcare, for people living in poverty, and for the elderly; as well as social care services and programmes that facilitate access to jobs.

This indicates that young people perceive social protection as a comprehensive set of programmes and services able to address various risks people face during their lifetimes.

The role of social protection in facilitating access to employment was chosen as a single response by 11% of respondents. This is an important finding, as it strongly suggests that young respondents in this poll see a need for stronger policy and programme links between social protection and programmes for promoting employment. Caring for children with disabilities and children without parental care is the second-ranking single option, possibly indicating the importance that respondents assign to the role of social care services.

Many respondents answering this question excluded unemployment benefits and cash payments to low-income families from their selections. These respondents thought that the purpose of social protection was to help people whose personal characteristics (such as disability) in interaction with external barriers are preventing them from obtaining sufficient incomes, while unemployment and low income were perceived as a result of a poor economic situation.

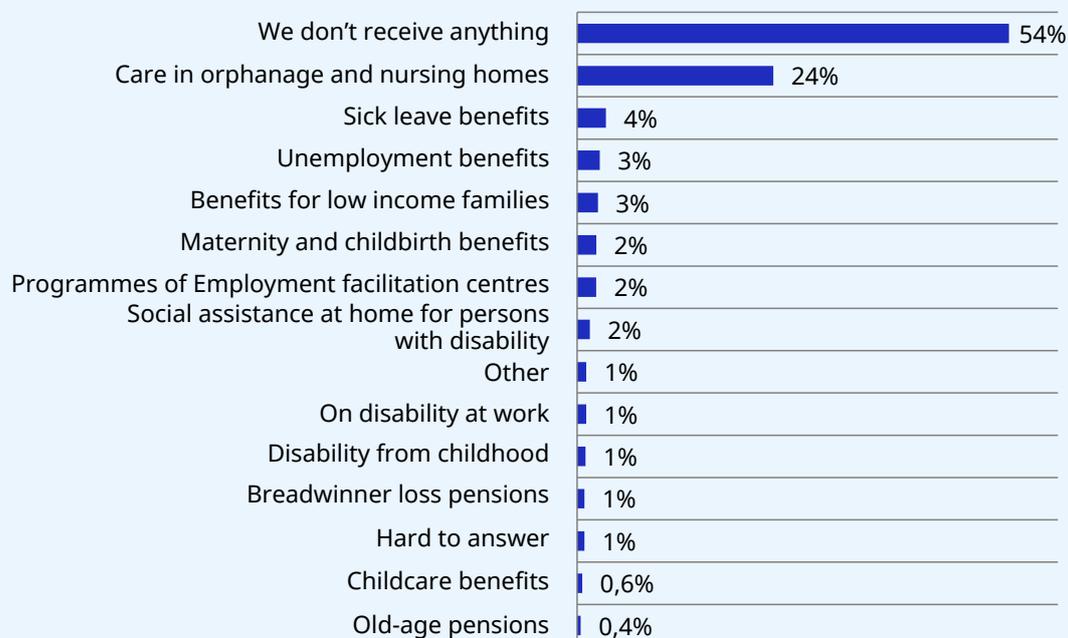
Pensions and maternity benefits were selected as a single option by a very small proportion of respondents. It could be that the age of the respondents and their educational status as students incline them to be less concerned about these programmes at this point in their lives. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents did include those categories through the option to select all the programmes and services listed.

Interestingly, the first option for a substantial proportion of respondents was that it was difficult to answer what social protection is, or that it is something “other” than the choices provided. This may point to a need to increase discussion of social protection, as these young people in the future will be workers, contributors to social protection and beneficiaries of it. The “Other” option also provided an opportunity for the poll participants to state their opinions of what social protection should include or achieve and to comment on social protection.

► **Selected opinions from U-Report respondents:**

- Also, the introduction of unconditional basic income;
- Decreasing the gender pay gap;
- Social assistance for the population of rural and remote areas, single mothers who have lost breadwinners, and orphans;
- Reduce tuition fees or provide privileged status for those who are in need;
- Helping the elderly and those who are listed in the Iron Notebook;
- Improving the education system;
- Social protection consists of all the options listed except cash benefits for those in need and unemployment benefits;
- Creation of jobs will resolve many problems;
- If the economy had grown/salaries increased/corruption had been eliminated, social protection would not be needed.

► Figure 3. Coverage by social protection



Only 55% of the population in Uzbekistan is covered by at least one social protection programme (ILO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2020). The poll also shows that 54% of respondents live in families where no one is covered by social protection. These results are consistent with the overall coverage by social protection as reported in other large-scale surveys of the general population.

Some 24% of respondents reported that they live in families with a member who is receiving a retirement pension. This indicates that most respondents either live with working-age parents, or perhaps have formed their own nuclear families and are not living in multigenerational households.

The second most often mentioned programme was childcare benefits – 4% of respondents answered that their families were receiving them. According to the ILO flagship report on social protection, 29.2% of children in Uzbekistan are covered by social protection (ILO, 2021).

There were no significant differences in answers attributable to gender, regional or occupational factors. Interestingly, 3% of the respondents did not know if their families were covered by any social protection programmes.

▶ **1% of respondents who chose the "Other" option wrote the following:**

- ▶ Even though we are a family in need because I'm a single mother and we don't own a house; we are listed neither in the Women's Notebook nor in the Youth Notebook;
- ▶ I have twins and am in need, but when I applied for social protection, I was rejected because I was not employed. I thought social protection was intended to help in such situations;
- ▶ The head of our mahalla committee receives the money, even if it should be ours according to documents;
- ▶ My father is a veteran of the Afghan war, he receives a disability benefit;
- ▶ I receive subsidies for entrepreneurship.

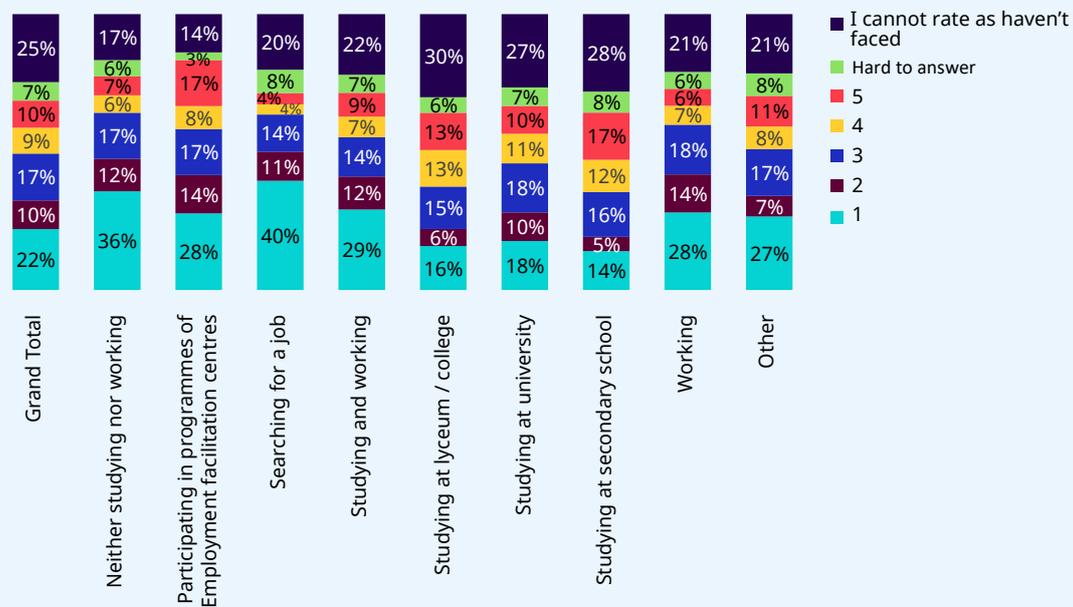
► Perception of being protected from risks

Respondents were asked to rate on scale from 1 (extremely poor) to 5 (excellent) the capacity of social protection to prevent or mitigate income, social or employment risks that they are facing or might encounter at some point. A quarter of all respondents could not judge to what extent state social protection would respond to their needs.

Close to 6,000 poll participants rated the capacity of social protection to respond to their needs. A majority of nearly one half rated it below 3, and 22% of respondents did not feel that they were protected from hardship at all by the state and rated social protection as extremely poor. Some 25% of all respondents could not judge how well they were provided with social protection because they had not had yet had experience in seeking it.

Male respondents were less satisfied with social protection than women. Specifically, 25% of men felt that provision of social protection was extremely poor, whereas 18% of women were of the same opinion. Similarly, positive ratings by female respondents were slightly more common than for male respondents; 11% of women and 9% of men gave high ratings for provision of social protection. Notably, 28% of female respondents could not assess provision of social protection because they had never applied for social protection services in their lives; among male respondents this percentage was 22%.

► **Figure 4. Perception of state social protection based on current type of activity**
1 = extremely poor and 5 = excellent



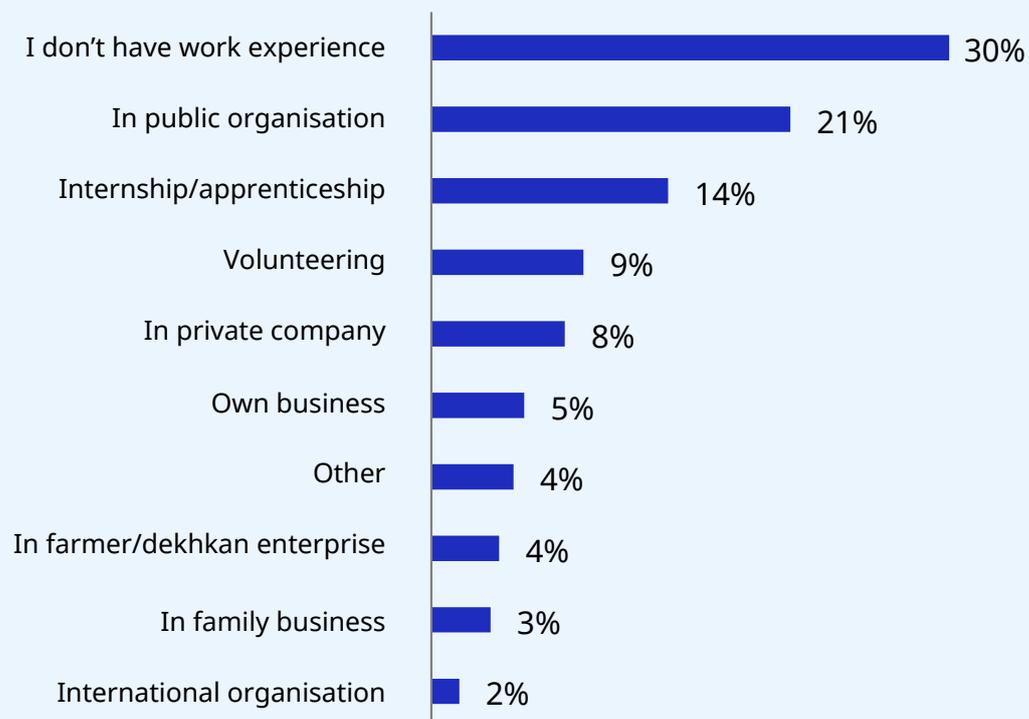
As can be seen in the chart above, there were significant differences in responses to this question based on the activity of respondents. There are also differences according to age. Younger respondents were more content with the state social policy whereas older respondents, especially those who think that they do not need social protection programmes, offered more negative assessments.

▶ Employment

The second block of the questionnaire contained 3 employment-related questions, and 7,558 respondents responded to these three questions:

- ▶ Please describe your previous or on-going work experience;
- ▶ This work was/is ... paid/unpaid;
- ▶ How will you look for a job when you want to find employment or change your current job?

▶ Figure 5. Past or ongoing work experience of respondents



Work experience: As the main target group of the U-Report platform are young people studying at educational institutions, 30% of respondents answered that they did not have any work experience. Among students at all educational institutions the share of those who did not have work experience was 37.8%. Only 27% of the unemployed and those in the NEET category did not have work experience.

Some 70% of the poll respondents did have work experience. The most prevalent form of work experience was in public organisations — 62% of working respondents had been or were working in public institutions, while 40% of respondents who were combining studies and work, as well as 34% of young people participating in state employment programmes, were engaged in public service.

Internships and apprenticeship were also common among youth, especially among students; 24% of college and lyceum students and 18% of university students were working on those terms. Some 9% of respondents mentioned that they did volunteer work, and this response was higher among secondary school students (14%), college and lyceum students (12%), and university students (10%).

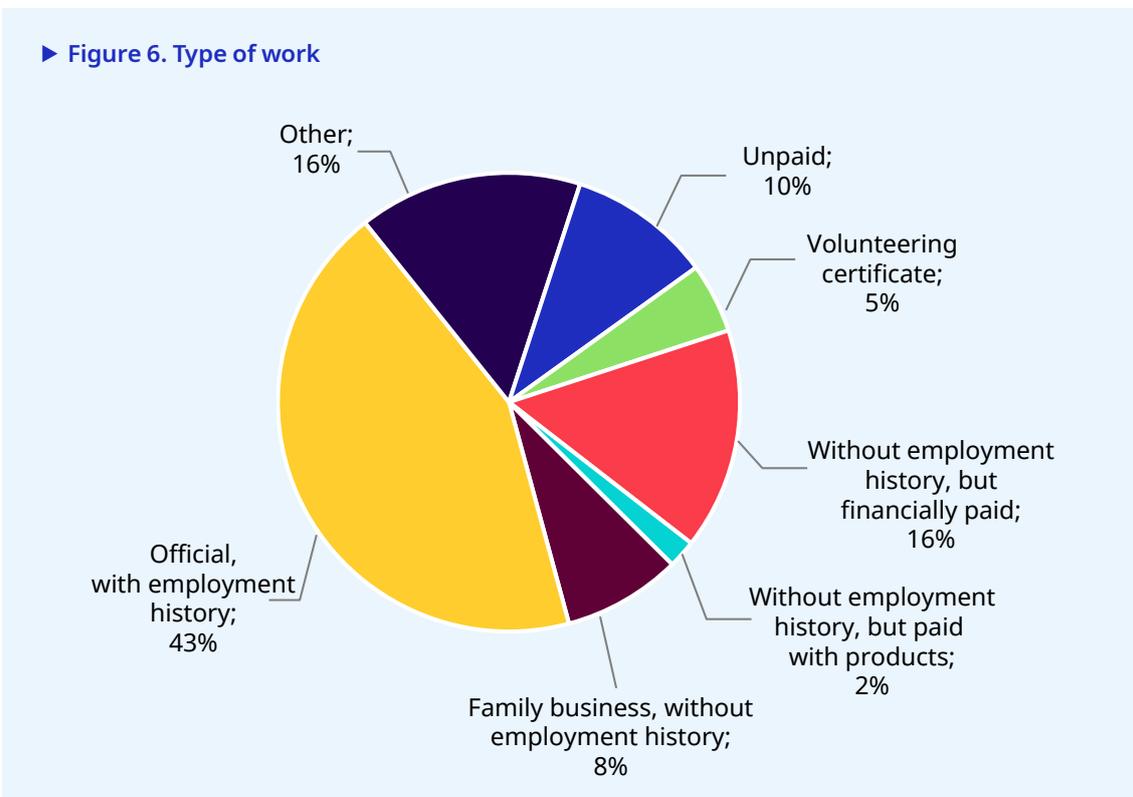
According to UNICEF's "Youth of Uzbekistan" report for 2020, 24.5% of youth stated that they were employed either formally or informally, while 37% of UNICEF respondents aged 14-30 categorised themselves as NEET. The share of NEET is alarmingly high among youth aged 19-24 (56.3%) and 25-30 (53%).

Being NEET among women is more prevalent for young women. Because the U-Report poll was conducted mainly within the student population, the proportion of NEET did not exceed 2% for either male or female respondents. However, UNICEF's report revealed that 69% women aged 19-24 were NEET compared to 33% for men, and that percentage was even higher at 74% among women aged 25-30, although for men in the same age cohort only 25% were NEET). Only 1.7% of women aged 14-18 reported being NEET, a level that is not substantially different from that of men in the same cohort. The dramatic rise in NEET at an older age implies that there are obstacles in the transition from education to employment for young women.

While 38% of female respondents reported that they did not have work experience, that was the case for only 23% of male respondents. According to the latest household data presented in the World Bank report for 2021, total unemployment among women stood at 15% and 3% for men in 2017. However, young women find it more difficult than men to enter the labour market and retain jobs. Unemployment for women aged 16-24 ran as high as 28% compared to 9% for young men in the same age group. The unemployment gap between women and men aged 25 to 34 is somewhat lower with 16% of women unemployed compared to 2% of men. However, the unemployment gap between women and men in these two age groups seems to indicate that there are persistent and possibly structural causes.

There is also a gender gap in working for private companies and public organisations: 5% of female and 10% of male respondents worked in private companies; in public organisations these shares are 17% and 24% respectively. According to the ILO's report analysing gender equality in the world of work, the public sector is the main provider of formal employment for women in Uzbekistan (ILO, 2021b) with 69% of working women and 48% of working men employed in public organisations. Employment in public organisations also ensures access to social protection programmes. In 2018, 98% of employees in the public sector had access to social protection (ILO, 2021b). However, the three lowest-paid industries are also in the public sector: education, healthcare and social care services. As a result of occupational differences and the gender pay gap, the salaries of women were 35.2% less than the salaries of men in 2018.

Work conditions: 43% of all respondents stated that their work was official with records on employment history; among young men this indicator was 46%, while among women it was 40%.



The second most common type of work is informal employment with monetary payment. Most students had been engaged in unpaid work: 14% of secondary school students, 19% of college and lyceum students, and 16% of university students. It is noteworthy that 19% of respondents participating in programmes at employment promotion centres also reported that their previous work was not paid.

There is no major divergence in responses to the question about work experience among regions, except for Tashkent city. Overall, 8% of respondents answered that they had worked in private companies, but in Tashkent 24% were employed in them. Internships and apprenticeships were not common in the capital and Tashkent region standing at 8% and 6% respectively, while the average percentage for the rest of the regions was 14%.

Job search: The most popular source for information on employment opportunities is personal networks; 26% of the respondents stated that they would seek the help of their friends and acquaintances, and that source of employment opportunities was equally important for both gender groups. That opinion about personal networks was more prevalent among the employed (over 30%) than among participants in programmes at employment promotion centres (19%).

► **Table 1. Sources of information about employment opportunities based on the type of activity**

Row Labels	Grand Total	Studying at a secondary school	Studying at a lyceum or college	Studying at university	Studying and working	Working	Neither studying nor working	Searching for a job	Participating in programmes of employment promotion centres	Other
Friends, acquaintances	26%	21%	29%	23%	33%	31%	26%	27%	19%	29%
Social media	20%	16%	13%	23%	19%	17%	22%	19%	19%	10%
Employment promotion centres	14%	13%	20%	16%	11%	10%	10%	11%	25%	14%
Career websites	11%	10%	6%	11%	13%	15%	14%	10%	3%	8%
Other	8%	13%	9%	8%	9%	6%	3%	8%	–	13%
Going abroad to earn money	7%	8%	4%	5%	5%	11%	16%	13%	9%	9%
Family connections	6%	8%	11%	6%	5%	4%	5%	4%	6%	6%
Job fairs	5%	6%	4%	5%	5%	5%	4%	3%	19%	7%
Publicly posted vacancies	2%	2%	3%	3%	1%	–	1%	3%	–	1%
Print media	1%	1%	1%	1%	–	0%	1%	1%	–	1%

Even though the programmes of the Employment Promotion Centres (EPC) provide employment opportunities, this option was not popular among the young; only 14% would consider using these centres to seek assistance with employment. Only 11% of the unemployed would use EPCs to find out about employment opportunities, and only 10% of respondents who were NEET would do so. Participants in employment promotion programmes were more likely to rely on employment promotion centres than other groups of respondents, as 25% of those participants would apply to the EPCs. The proportion of women who use employment promotion centres (18%) is nearly 8% higher than for men (10%).

The government of Uzbekistan also supports youth self-employment by providing subsidised loans for business start-ups along with tax exemptions, subsidies from public funds, including funds from Youth Notebook⁶ for paying rent and buying assets. Uzbekistan has been one of the few countries that held onto positive economic growth rates during the recent pandemic. In 2022, according to the World Bank's Global Economic Prospects report (World Bank, 2022), the Uzbek economy will grow by 5.6%.

6 More detail is available online at: <https://lex.uz/docs/5382163>.

Despite these positive trends, demographic growth is outpacing economic growth in Uzbekistan, and this generates more labour resources than the national economy can absorb. This imbalance has caused 2.5 million Uzbek citizens to seek employment abroad (ILO, 2020). About 5.5% of people aged 16 and older are international labour migrants, and the largest age category of labour migrants is between 25 and 34 (World Bank, 2021). The top three destinations for labour migrants from Uzbekistan are Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkey in descending order. According to the poll, labour migration was the fifth most frequent option overall, but was more common among respondents who were NEET (16%), unemployed (13%) and working (11%). The proportion of men preferring labour migration as a potential employment opportunity is over twice that for women (10% against 4%).

► Conclusion

Uzbekistan's large young population can make a significant contribution to the country's ambitious economic development plans. Enrolment in higher education has been increasing, and the vocational and secondary specialised education systems have recently been reformed. A special Agency on Youth Affairs was established in 2020 to respond to challenges faced by youth. Special programmes have been developed to support youth employment and entrepreneurship.

Less optimistically, young people's access to basic income security when their earnings from work are insufficient, as well as their access to health and social care services and to social insurance, appears limited. Their interaction with the social protection system is mostly "second hand" through their family members who are currently covered by social protection. The poll shows that young people have relatively little confidence in social protection and employment promotion programmes. Most of the respondents do not feel protected from risks. Those who have tried to access social protection and employment promotion programmes have varied experiences, but the general conclusion is that there is need for improvement in the type of services and outreach offered and in the risks that should be covered. One important point is that the vast majority of young people think that the social protection system should be comprehensive enough to mitigate various risks throughout life, and they see a need for stronger links between the social protection services and employment programmes. Policies facilitating easy transition from education to employment are vital for Uzbekistan's socio-economic development (ILO, 2021c). This would require more intervention on behalf of those at a disadvantage in the labour market such as young women, rural youth, and youth from low-income households (ILO, 2021c) and especially those who meet more than one of these criteria.

As the poll illustrates, unemployment benefits were not regarded as an essential social protection programme. Therefore, it is important to ensure that young people become familiar with their rights and entitlements. Protection in the event of job loss is an integral component of international social protection standards.

Unemployment protection measures should also target new entrants into the labour market. Otherwise, young people are at risk of unemployment or starting their work experience in the informal sector of the economy where labour regulations ensuring decent work conditions and social insurance for illness, injuries and unemployment do not exist.

One of the key objectives of the National Strategy for Social Protection is to increase the coverage of social protection and focus on extending it to informal workers. Due to lack of formal employment opportunities and decent jobs, many secondary school graduates are pushed into informal jobs or labour migration where they are excluded from the social protection system. It is important to ensure that they are covered by social insurance programmes for ensuring decent work conditions.

► **The ILO has been quite specific in its recommendations:**

The areas in most need of attention are individualized counselling and guidance services; the systemization and analysis of available labour market information; the availability of an adequate system of active and passive labour market policies; and the review of funding mechanisms for labour market policies. ...

The second major challenge is organization of the service. At present, there are too many isolated units

responsible for portions of the delivery of PES services. Inevitably, this creates overlap, information gaps, and detracts from a more integrated approach toward fulfilling the function of an employment service. The ILO suggestion foresees the creation of a discrete branch called "Employment", headed by the First Deputy Minister within the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (ILO, 2021c, p. 47).

Participation of young people in the policy-making processes in countries like Uzbekistan with huge demographic potential is a vital prerequisite of economic and social development. The opinions of young people should be an integral consideration in devising key national development strategies, such as social protection, poverty reduction and promotion of employment. Platforms like U-Report provide an excellent opportunity for engagement with youth and understanding their opinions. It is equally important that official consultative channels engage young people in the public policy-making processes.

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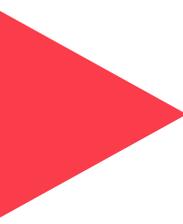
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