In partnership with

ILO WAEMU Youth Country Briefs

May 2026

Youth Labour Market Trends in Mali[1]

Key points

- Following years of political instability and security challenges, Mali has nonetheless maintained positive albeit modest economic growth. Since 2021, annual real GDP growth has ranged between 3.1 and 5.0 per cent, just barely outpacing rapid population increases. Mali thus remains a low-income country, with a purchasing power parity (PPP) adjusted GDP per capita (p.c.) of roughly US$2,973 in 2025, just over half the sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) average (US$5,324). The country also currently ranks among the least peaceful in WAEMU according to the Global Peace Index (GPI), reflecting persistent insecurity over the last decade (Mali was 154th of 163 countries globally in 2025).
- Employment for both younger and older workers is overwhelmingly agricultural, especially for men. Around 64 per cent of all workers in Mali are engaged in agriculture. Industry accounts for a very small share of jobs, while service sector employment is more the preserve of women.
- The overall youth (15–29) NEET rate stood at 29.0 per cent in 2022. As in many countries, there is a large gap between young women and men – young women's NEET rate (43.6 per cent) is more than three times that of young men (13.4 per cent). However, both the overall youth NEET rate and the gender NEET gap have fallen slightly since 2019, as youth employment and education participation improved modestly for women.
- There are significant disparities in NEET rates between young people with and without disabilities, and these gaps have grown in recent years. Only about 0.9 per cent of Malian youth report having a disability in 2022, but their NEET rate (54.9 per cent) was nearly twice that of non-disabled youth (28.8 per cent). This disadvantage was especially acute for young men with disabilities whose NEET rate is 35.2 percentage points (p.p.) higher than their non-disabled peers.
- In contrast to some other countries, NEET rates in Mali remain high even among youth with higher levels of education. This pattern became even more pronounced between 2019 and 2022, suggesting a growing educational mismatch. For example, in 2022 the NEET rate of young adults with intermediate education level was 46.1 per cent – the highest of any education group – whereas for those with less than basic education it was 38.0 per cent. Rising education attainment levels have not been met with sufficient expansion of decent work opportunities, leaving many educated young people without work.

[1] This brief was prepared by Niall O'Higgins and Vipasana Karkee (ILO) with some AI support managed by Dibyaudh Das (ILO). The authors are grateful for the very helpful comments provided by ILO colleagues Jonas Bausch, Yacouba Diallo, Sara Elder and Ali Madai Boukar as well as those provided by colleagues at the Mastercard Foundation including participants at a webinar organised by MCF on January 27, 2026.

1. Introduction: Contextual indicators

Despite years of conflict and political instability, Mali has registered reasonably consistent, if modest, macroeconomic growth. Between 2000 and 2025, [2]Mali reported an average real growth rate (local currency) of 4.5 per cent, compared to an annual population growth rate of 3.2 per cent. Despite the war, which has been waged continuously since January 2012, Mali still maintained average real economic growth of 4.4 per cent between 2012 and 2025. Overall, Mali's long-term growth has been slightly below the SSA regional average but has nevertheless outpaced global growth. However, with its fast expanding population, output has only just outpaced demographic growth

In the context of the war waged since 2012, Mali remains one of the most fragile countries in the WAEMU, and is classified as a low-income country.[3] Its PPP-adjusted GDP per capita was about US$2,973 in 2025 – a little over half the SSA average (US$5,324).[4] In terms of peace and stability, Mali is now ranked lowest in the WAEMU region according to the Global Peace Index[5]; in 2025 Mali was ranked near the bottom in SSA and 154th of 163 countries globally on the GPI.[6] Mali's GPI ranking in WAEMU is comparable with its ranking in the Human Development Index, where it is placed last (with Niger) among the eight countries. Although the country has made small improvements to human development in the 21st century, its relative position has not changed between 2015 and 2023 (to 188th of 193 countries worldwide). [7]

Box 1: YouthSTATS, a partnership between the ILO and the Mastercard Foundation

The ILO, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, has created a regularly updated dataset called YouthSTATS available on ILOSTAT. The dataset was first produced by the ILO as part of its partnership with the Mastercard Foundation "Work4Youth" project which concluded in 2016. Initially composed of labour indicators for young people aged 15-29 derived from the school-to-work transition surveys conducted through the partnership, the dataset now benefits from the ILO's stock of harmonized labour force survey micro-datasets. It serves as a central repository of international youth labour statistics.

This brief is one of eight country statistical briefs for WAEMU countries undertaken under the new partnership which provide an analysis of youth labour markets with a focus on gender, educational attainment and disability issues. To complement these statistical analyses, the new partnership also involves analyses of youth employment initiatives in WAEMU countries prepared with the direct engagement of young people in the region. The countries covered are Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo.

[2] IMF (2026).

[3] UN estimates and projections, July 2024 (UN, 2024; data also reported in ILOSTAT).

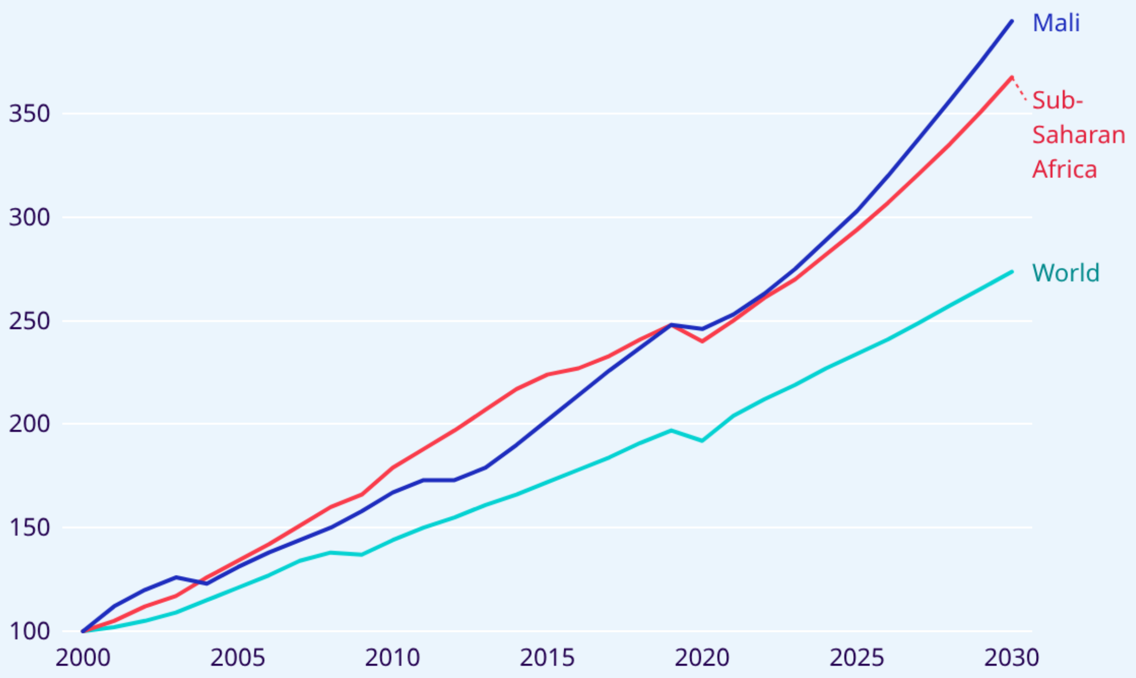
[4] The PPP adjusted GDP p.c. estimates used in this brief are from the IMF April 2026 WEO Database (IMF, 2026). Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) adjusted GDP converts a country's GDP into (usually) USD using exchange rates that equate the cost of a representative basket of goods and services in different countries.

[5] Institute for Economics & Peace (2025) and GPI raw data, 2008-2023.

[6] One might observe that a similar picture emerges from the Fragile States index, according to which, in 2024, Mali was ranked the most fragile of the eight WAEMU countries.

[7] UNDP (2025). The Human Development Index (HDI) is a broader measure of a country's human development which takes into account also life expectancy and educational attainment, in addition to per capita GDP.

▶ Figure 1. Real GDP, Mali, Sub-Saharan Africa and the World, 2000-2030; 2000=100



Note: The figure reports indices for real GDP over time, for Mali, Sub-Saharan African and the world with 2000 = 100
Source: Calculated from the IMF World Economic Outlook April 2026 database.

The male employment-to-population ratio in Mali is somewhat above the ILO modelled estimate for sub-Saharan Africa; however, the female ratio is well below the regional – and even the global – average, displaying a substantial gender gap.[8] As of 2022, Mali's employment-to-population ratio was 57.5 per cent overall, close to the global average; however, this masks a relatively high ratio for men (76.2 per cent) and an equally low one for women (40.5 per cent) (table 1). Mali's female employment-to-population ratio is nearly 20 percentage points (p.p.) below the SSA average (59.7 per cent), bringing down the national rate despite the relatively high employment-population amongst Malian men.

▶ Table 1. Employment to population ratio by sex in Mali, SSA, Africa, and the World, 2022 (age 15+) (percentage)

	Female	Male	Total
Mali	40.5	76.2	57.5
Sub-Saharan Africa (ILO Modelled Estimates)	59.7	71.8	65.6
Africa (ILO Modelled Estimates)	50.5	69.9	60.1
World (ILO Modelled Estimates)	45.7	69.4	57.5

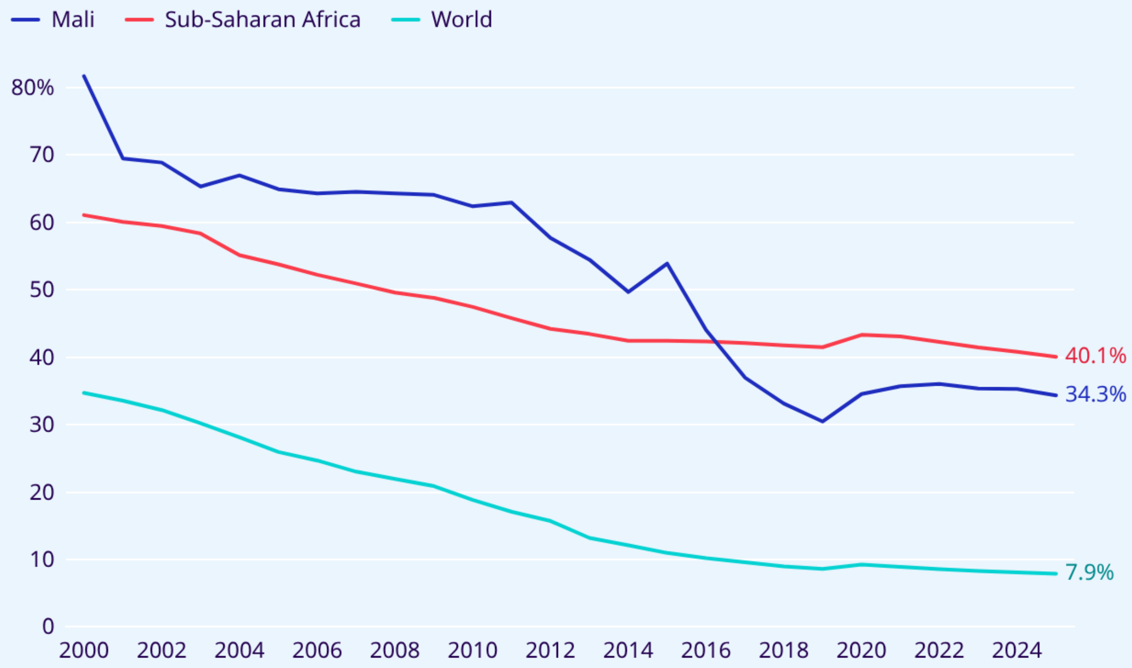
Source Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository; ILO Modelled estimates (November 2025), https://ilostat.ilo.org/

[8] This brief applies the definition of employment established by the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 1982. The 13th ICLS definition identifies all persons who worked for at least one hour during the reference period as employed. More recently, the 19th ICLS established a new definition which classifies as employed all those who work for "pay or profit" for at least one hour during the reference period, however, the EHCVM survey does not contain sufficient information to apply the newer definition. The 13th ICLS definition tends to have a higher recorded employment-to-population ratio, especially in lower income countries because, for example, it includes among the employed, workers in subsistence agriculture, whereas the 19th ICLS definition does not. However, both definitions include workers in informal jobs and any other type of remunerated work of at least one hour whether or not it is formally recorded (including, for example, street vendors, unregistered platform workers and domestic workers).

Note: The reported ratios all apply the definition of employment established by the 13th ICLS in 1982.

Mali's low income levels are reflected in relatively high working poverty rates; these have improved gradually. In 2025, an estimated 34.3 per cent of Mali's working population lived in extreme working poverty (living on less than $3 PPP per day). This is far higher than the global figure of 7.9 per cent, but it is still below the SSA average of 40.1 per cent.[9] Mali's working poverty rate has declined significantly since 2000, yet remains higher than in some neighbouring WAEMU countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire or Senegal.

► **Figure 2. Extreme working poverty rates, Mali, Sub-Saharan Africa and the World, 2000–2025**



Note: The figure reports extreme working poverty rates of employed persons aged 15 and over, for Benin, Sub-Saharan African and the world.
Source: Based on ILO Modelled estimates (November 2025), https://ilostat.ilo.org/

Agriculture dominates employment in Mali. As of 2022, about 64.2 per cent of all adults (15+) worked in agriculture. Among youth, the share was even higher, accounting for 70.7 per cent of employed youth (15–29). The industrial sector absorbs only around 8.6 per cent of employment, while services account for just over 27 per cent of jobs as a whole; and only around 20 per cent of youth employment. Among both youth and adults, men are more concentrated in agriculture and industry, whereas women are more likely to work in services. The employment structure in Mali is thus heavily weighted toward agriculture compared to the SSA average of 49.5 per cent. Table 2 illustrates the broad sectoral employment breakdown in Mali versus the sub-Saharan Africa average in 2022.

[9] ILO modelled estimates, November 2025. The working poverty rate is an estimate of the proportion of the employed population living in poverty despite being employed, implying that their employment-related incomes are not sufficient to lift them and their families out of poverty and ensure decent living conditions. Extreme working poverty is defined as the percentage of the employed population living in households with a per capita income of under US$3 PPP per day, https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/working-poverty/.

Box 2: Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM) in WAEMU, 2019-2025

The analysis of youth labour market trends in the ILO-WAEMU Youth Country Briefs is being undertaken primarily using the Household Living Conditions Surveys (Enquêtes Harmonisées sur le Conditions de Vie des Ménages; EHCVM) being undertaken by the World Bank and the WAEMU commission in WAEMU member states. These are nationally representative Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) household surveys which incorporate labour modules, allowing for labour market analysis in the eight countries. The EHCVM surveys used in these briefs apply the same international statistical standards and questionnaires across years and countries, thereby collecting data that can be harmonized and allowing comparisons across countries and over time. These household surveys were conducted in each of the WAEMU countries in 2018-2019, 2021-2022 and 2025-2026.

Data for 2019 and 2022 has been received and processed by the ILO for all eight countries. All data in the ILO-WAEMU Country Briefs utilize EHCVM survey data unless otherwise stated. Data for the third round (2025-2026) will be available in late 2026.

Table 2. Employment distribution by economic activity by sex, Mali, 2022 (age 15+) (percentage)

	Female	Male	Total
Agriculture	61.8	65.6	64.2
Industry	7.6	9.2	8.6
Services	30.5	25.2	27.2

Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/ .

Informal employment is widespread, especially among women. In 2022, around 95.5 per cent of workers in the country were informally employed – 97.5 per cent of female workers and about 94.3 per cent of male workers.[10] This prevalence is comparable to the typical situation in other WAEMU countries. Despite sustained economic growth in recent years, Mali remains a primarily agrarian economy with a labour market dominated by informal agricultural and service-sector work.

2. Youth labour market trends

Africa is a relatively young continent, with a youth population which continues to grow with all the potential and challenges this brings (ILO, 2020a; box 3). Youth population growth in Mali is exceptionally rapid. Between 2015 and 2025, Mali's youth population (aged 15–29) grew by over 40 per cent, at an average rate of roughly 3.7 per cent per annum, outpacing the growth of the youth population in SSA overall (around 2.9 per cent per annum over the same period); figure 3 shows this trend.[11] This demographic surge means that every year large cohorts of young people are attaining working age in Mali.

[10] ILO micro database. As noted in box 2, these and the other labour market indicators analysed in this brief are derived from the EHCVM survey data.

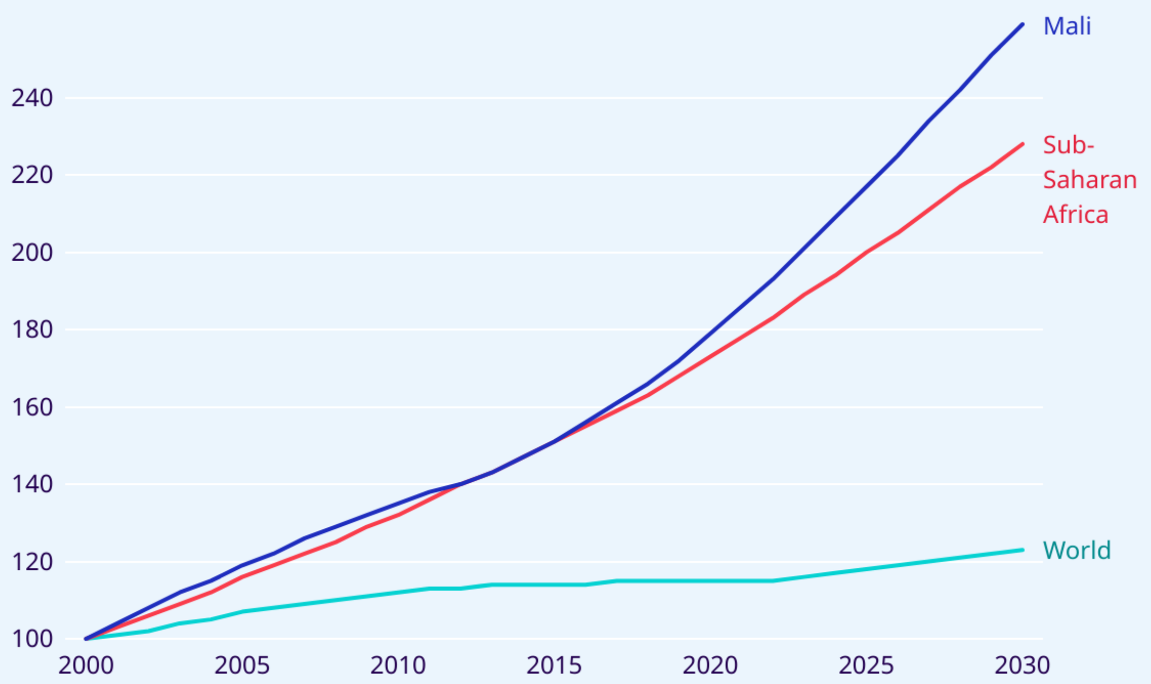
[11] UN estimates and projections, July 2024 (thousands), ILOSTAT

▶ Box 3: Who are the youth?

For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines youth as persons aged between 15 and 24 years old. The specific age-group was originally intended to cover the period during which the School-to-Work transition takes place for most young people. This is the definition used for the standard indicators produced by the ILO in ILOSTAT including the ILO modelled estimates of regional and global age-based aggregate indicators (ILO, 2026).

In practice, varying approaches to the age-range applied to define of youth are to be found in different contexts. The African Union, for example, defines young people as those aged between 15 and 35 inclusive. For the analysis presented in this brief, following the standard practice for the country level indicators reported in the ILO's YOUTHSTAT database, youth refer to persons aged between 15 and 29 years old. This recognizes the fact that some young people remain in education for longer and captures more information on the post-graduation employment experiences of young people. For comparison purposes, selected indicators for young people aged 15-35 are available in an online data annex.

▶ Figure 3. Youth (15–29) population in Mali, Sub-Saharan Africa, Africa and the World, 2000–2030; 2000=100



The figure reports indices for the youth population (age 15-29), for Mali, *Sub-Saharan Africa and the World with 2000 = 100 in each case.*
Source: Population indices are calculated on UN estimates and projections of population by age and sex, July 2024 (thousands)

Once one looks beyond primary education, educational attainment in Mali remains low by international standards. As of 2020, UNESCO estimates that about 46 per cent of Malians had completed primary education.[12] At secondary levels the rates are even lower – lower secondary education completion rate was 17.3 per cent and upper-secondary completion is below 10 per cent. Furthermore, significant gender gaps emerge at secondary and higher levels: fewer young women

[12] http://sdg4-data.uis.unesco.org/ [accessed on 18 August 2025].

attain lower and upper secondary education than young men. While primary schooling has expanded in Mali over the past two decades, progression to higher education levels remains limited, especially for women and girls.

Despite low overall attainment, participation in education or training among youth has risen slightly. In 2019, of those not in employment, about 20.9 per cent of Mali's youth (15–29) were in education or training; by 2022 this had inched up to 22.5 per cent (figure 4). Young men are more likely to be studying than young women – in 2022, around 24.3 per cent of male youth were in education, compared to 20.8 per cent of female youth. This modest increase in educational participation post-2019 may partly reflect recovery from pandemic disruptions and a lack of jobs, which is pushing some youth to stay in school longer.

▶ Box 4: NEET

This brief makes extensive use of the NEET rate – the share of young people Not in Employment, Education or Training – as a measure of youth labour market vulnerability. This is in line with the adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 and the consequent establishment of reductions in the NEET rate as the target indicator (SDG 8.6.1) chosen to measure progress in youth labour markets. Although NEETs also includes (most of) the young unemployed[13] (the so-called 'Active NEETs), the NEET rate is a broader concept encompassing all young people who are, for whatever reason, not studying or working for pay or profit. NEETs are consequently a much larger, as well as a more heterogeneous group than the young unemployed including a substantial group of young people who are not studying or working, but who are also not actively looking for work. Often termed 'inactive' NEETs, many of these young people would like to work but are not looking for it, either because they believe no jobs are to be found or because they face additional obstacles - such as care responsibilities - which impede their active participation in the labour force.

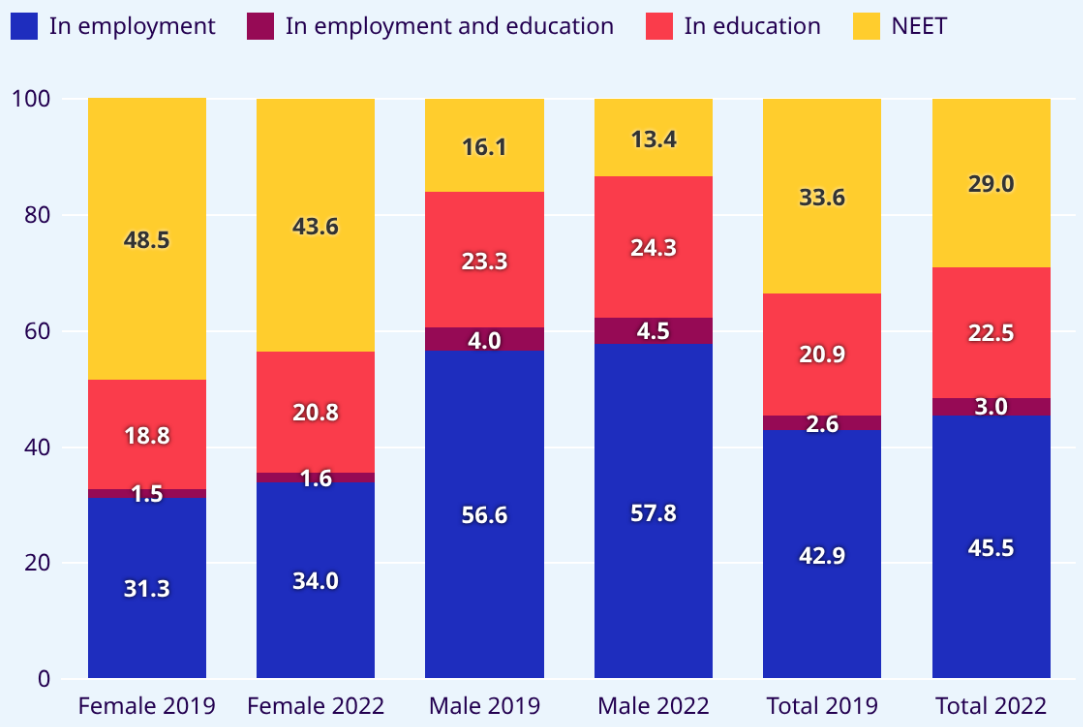
Inter alia, the shift from the youth unemployment rate to the NEET rate as the focus of policies to promote decent work amongst young people leads naturally to a broadening of the scope of such interventions. Reducing the NEET rate can be achieved both by increasing entry into employment, but also by increasing participation in education and training. Moreover, there are many factors underlying (different types) of NEET status. These include in particular obstacles to obtaining decent work faced by specific groups – such as young women and/or young people with disabilities.

Source: O'Higgins et al. (2023). O'Higgins (2025) provides a brief non-technical overview.

Alongside education, youth employment trends have also shifted. The employment-to-population ratio (EPR) for youth (15–29) increased slightly from 45.6 per cent in 2019 to 48.5 per cent in 2022. This indicates a rising share of youth in employment. However, as with the working age population as a whole, there is a large gender disparity: in 2022, about 62.3 per cent of young men were employed, compared to only 35.6 per cent of young women. At the same time about three times as many young men as young women are simultaneously studying and working, although the population share is fairly modest for both sexes. The gender gap in youth employment mirrors the NEET gender gap – many young women remain neither working nor in school or training.

[13] Excluding a relatively small but increasingly significant group of young people who are both unemployed and in education.

Figure 4. Youth status (age 15–29) in Mali by sex, 2019–2022 (percentage)



Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/

Sectoral employment patterns among youth mirror the overall trends discussed earlier. Young people in Mali today are, if anything, even more concentrated in agriculture than the older generation. Unlike some other countries where urbanization and economic transition see youth moving out of farming, in Mali youth (especially young men) remain heavily in agriculture, likely due to limited non-farm opportunities (table 3). Compared to adults, youth are over-represented in agriculture and under-represented in services. At the same time, the gender differences in sectoral employment observed in the overall workforce are also evident among youth. In 2022, 72.8 per cent of employed young men (15–29) worked in agriculture, compared to an estimated 68 per cent of young women. Young men were about twice as likely as young women to work in industry (10.2 per cent of young men's jobs, compared to around 6.5 per cent of young women's). Conversely, young women were more likely to work in services - about 26.2 per cent of young female employment is in this sector compared to 17.0 per cent of young male employment. These figures highlight that the gender gap in industrial employment is particularly large among youth while the gender gap in agriculture is somewhat narrower among youth than among older workers, since a majority of both young men and young women are engaged in farming.

Table 3. Youth (age 15–29) employment distribution by economic activity and sex in Mali, 2022 (percentage)

	Female	Male	Total
Agriculture	67.3	72.8	70.7
Industry	6.5	10.2	8.8
Services	26.2	17.0	20.5

Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/

Among youth, the majority are self-employed: 71.7 per cent of employed youth in 2022 were working on their own account or contributing in family businesses, whereas only 28.3 per cent were categorized as employees or wage workers (table 4).[14] Notably, the share of young women who are employees declined from 22.8 per cent in 2019 to 20.7 per cent in 2022, while the share of young men in wage employment rose to 32.9 per cent (from 26.4 per cent in 2019). This indicates some improvement in young men's access to paid jobs, but a setback for young women, and overall wage employment opportunities remain substantial for Malian youth.

▶ **Table 4. Youth (age 15–29) employment distribution by status in employment and sex in Mali, 2019 and 2022 (percentage)**

	Female		Male		Total	
	2019	2022	2019	2022	2019	2022
Employees	22.8	20.7	26.4	32.9	25.0	28.3
Self-employed	77.2	79.3	73.6	67.1	75.0	71.7

Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/ .

Informality in employment is almost universal in Mali. According to the latest survey data from 2022, nearly 99 per cent of Malian youth employment is informal – similar to typical levels in other WAEMU countries. Among adults 30 and over, informality is somewhat lower at 93.7 per cent, but still dominant. This high informality partly reflects the large share of workers who are self-employed or contributing-family workers in agriculture. This indicates that informality disproportionately affects entrants to the labour market – nearly every young person who manages to find work does so in the informal economy. In part, this reflects the very high share of self-employment in the youth population. As noted earlier, in 2022 about 71.7 per cent of young workers were self-employed (or contributing family workers), while only 28.3 per cent were wage or salaried employees.

Although the share of youth employment in wage jobs changed slightly between 2019 and 2022 – rising from roughly 26.4 per cent to 32.9 per cent for young men, but falling from 22.8 per cent to 20.7 per cent for young women – this does not signal a major expansion of decent formal jobs. Overall, despite the small uptick in male wage work, the vast majority of Mali's young workers remain trapped in informal activities – commonly associated with lower wages - and progress in creating formal employment opportunities for youth has been substantial.

The prevalence of informality among young workers varies little across sectors as nearly all employed youth across every broad sector are in informal employment (table 5).

▶ **Table 5. Distribution of employment, prevalence of self-employment and prevalence of informality by sector among youth (age 15–29) in Mali, 2019 and 2022 (percentage)**

Sector	Employment by sector		Prevalence of self-employment		Prevalence of informality
	2019	2022	2019	2022	2022
Agriculture	63.9	70.7	93.4	84.3	100.0

[14] The ILO status in employment indictor subdivides workers to describe the relationships of their jobs to the workplace. Broadly, the employed are classified as either "employees" or "self-employed". The former are in paid employment (with explicit or implicit contracts) which provide them with basic renumeration, whereas the latter are mainly or wholly reliant on sales and profits. Self-employment is dominated by own-account workers in low quality informal employment and in the past was indeed used as a proxy for informal employment.

Manufacturing	4.9	5.0	47.2	43.5	98.7
Construction	2.2	1.9	14	8.3	96.8
Mining and quarrying; Electricity, gas and water supply	1.1	1.8	44.4	69.2	99.0
Market Services (Trade; Transportation; Accommodation and food; and Business and administrative services)	11.2	13.0	63.7	53.8	96.8
Non-market services (Public administration; Community, social and other services and activities)	16.8	7.5	30.7	19.5	92.5

Note: Informality could not be defined in the 2019 EHCVM/ECVM surveys due to missing information on registration and bookkeeping of enterprises.

Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/

Consistent with employment and educational participation trends, the youth NEET rate (not in employment, education or training) fell from an estimated 33.6 per cent in 2019 to 29.0 per cent in 2022 (figure 4, box 4). This is a positive trend, although the NEET rate remains high. Moreover, young women continue to be far more likely to be NEET than young men: in 2022, 43.6 per cent of young women were NEET, versus 13.4 per cent of young men. To put it another way, the female NEET rate is over three times the male rate. The gender NEET gap did narrow slightly over the period from 32.4 p.p. to 30.2 p.p., but it is still the widest in the WAEMU region. The reduction in NEET was driven by a slight increase in youth employment and a slight rise in educational enrolment among youth during the post-pandemic recovery.

▶ **Table 6. Youth (age 15–29) NEET distribution by active-inactive status and sex in Mali, 2019 and 2022 (percentage)**

	Female		Male		Total	
	2019	2022	2019	2022	2019	2022
Active NEET	4.3	4.3	19.5	12.3	7.7	6.1
Inactive NEET	95.7	95.7	80.5	87.7	92.3	93.9

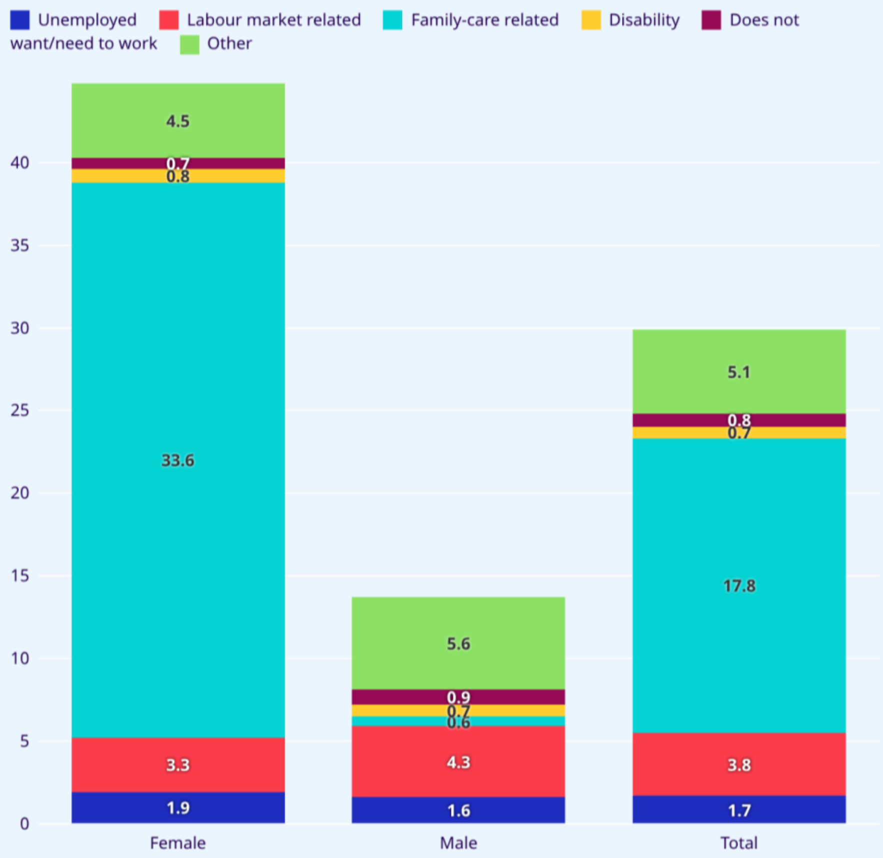
Note: Active NEETs are those who are not engaged in employment, education or training but are available and actively looking for employment opportunities, whereas inactive NEETs are also not engaged in employment, education or training but are not available or actively looking for employment.

Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/

Most young NEETs in Mali are inactive NEETs. Over 95 per cent of female NEET aged 15–29 and around 87 per cent of male NEET youth were not actively looking for work (table 6). Moreover, the share of NEETs who were not actively seeking jobs increased between 2019 and 2022 for both sexes. In effect, nine out of ten Malian youth who are not in work or school do not actively seek jobs. This is a concern, as it indicates high levels of discouragement and withdrawal from the labour market. However, it is typical in the WAEMU region, where the concept of unemployment is less applicable due to pervasive informal economies and scarce wage jobs.

Most young NEETs in Mali are either discouraged from seeking jobs, awaiting job or business prospects, or remain outside the labour force due to domestic responsibilities (figure 5). Traditional gender roles are a key factor in the large gender gap in NEET rates. Alarmingly, 33.6 per cent of young women in Benin are NEET due to care responsibilities at home, compared to only 0.6 per cent of young men. The other reasons for being NEET show little difference between young women and men. As a result, family-care responsibilities largely explain the significantly high NEET rates among young Malian women.

Figure 5. NEET rates of young people (aged 15–29) decomposed by reason for being NEET, males and females, Mali, 2022 (percentage)



Note: **Unemployed** NEETs are those who are not engaged in employment, education or training but are available and actively looking for employment opportunities**. Labour market related reasons** for being NEET include those associated with discouragement (past failure to find a suitable job, lack of experience, qualifications or jobs matching the person's skills, lack of jobs in the area, considered too young or too old by prospective employers, and does not know how/where to find a job) as well as other labour market reasons (waiting for an answer to an application, and seasonal break). **Family-care related reasons** cover looking after small children and other household and domestic responsibilities; **disability** covers young people who are not seeking a job due to disability or illness; whereas a young NEET who **"does not need/want to work"** may have other sources of income. **Other** is a residual category covering a variety of motivations not covered by the first four categories.
Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), held in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/.

3. Vulnerable groups in the youth labour market

3.1 Sex

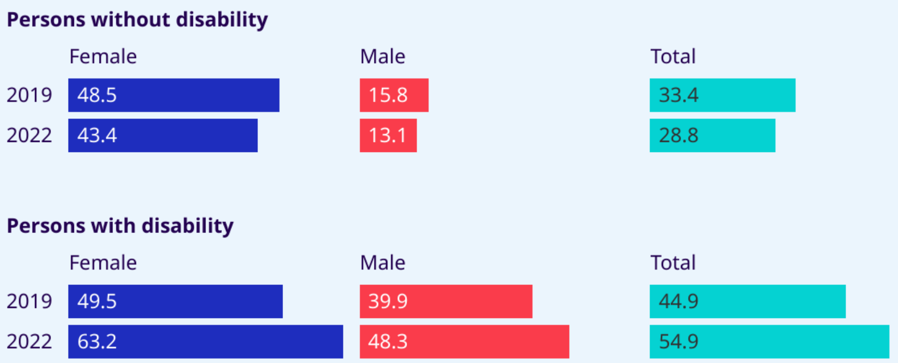
Young women in Mali face significantly more challenges than young men in gaining entry to the labour market. Nearly every key indicator shows a large gender gap. As noted, the NEET rate among young women is over three times that of young men. The employment-to-population ratio of young women is just half of that of young men, and young women also have lower rates of educational participation and attainment. In short, young women are much more likely to be not working or studying than young men.

There have been some small improvements in recent years. Between 2019 and 2022, the NEET rate of young women fell by 4.9 percentage points, and the share of young women in education or training (of those not in employment) rose by 2 p.p.. The gender gaps in NEET and education participation have narrowed marginally as a result. Additionally, the female youth EPR increased by a couple of percentage points (while the male EPR was essentially flat), which also reduced the gap in employment rates by about 3 p.p.. However, these positive changes have been very modest – young women's disadvantage remains severe. In some respects, it even worsened: for instance, the share of young women in wage employment shrank between 2019 and 2022, indicating that young women have become even more confined to self-employment and informal work. Overall, bridging the gender divide in Mali's youth labour market remains a formidable challenge.

3.2 Disability

People with disabilities face additional obstacles to participating effectively in the labour market. The 2025 Global Disability Summit in Berlin noted that, globally, young people with disabilities face NEET rates twice those of their non-disabled peers.[15] In Mali, only about 0.9 per cent of the youth population report having a disability or illness. Yet there is evidence of stark exclusion facing this group.

► **Figure 5. NEET rates of young people (aged 15–29) by disability status in Mali by sex, 2019 and 2022 (percentage)**



Note: Youth is defined as young people aged 15-29
Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/

In 2022, the NEET rate among youth with disabilities was 54.9 per cent, compared to 28.8 per cent for youth with no disability (figure 6).[16] This 26 p.p. gap indicates a very high relative disadvantage. Moreover, the disadvantage is sharper for young men with disabilities: the NEET rate of young men with disabilities is roughly 35 p.p. higher than that of young men without disabilities. Young women with disabilities also have higher NEET rates than their counterparts without disabilities, but since the baseline NEET rate for young women is already very high, the incremental gap is smaller at 19.8 p.p.. These data underscore that disability compounds the difficulties youth face and can be associated with extremely low chances of being employed or in school. Addressing the needs of the relatively small population of youth with disabilities is important to ensure they are not left behind in education, training, or employment initiatives.

[15] For a more detailed analysis of the disparities in the labour market outcomes faced by people with disabilities, see, for example, Annanian and Dellaferrera (2024).

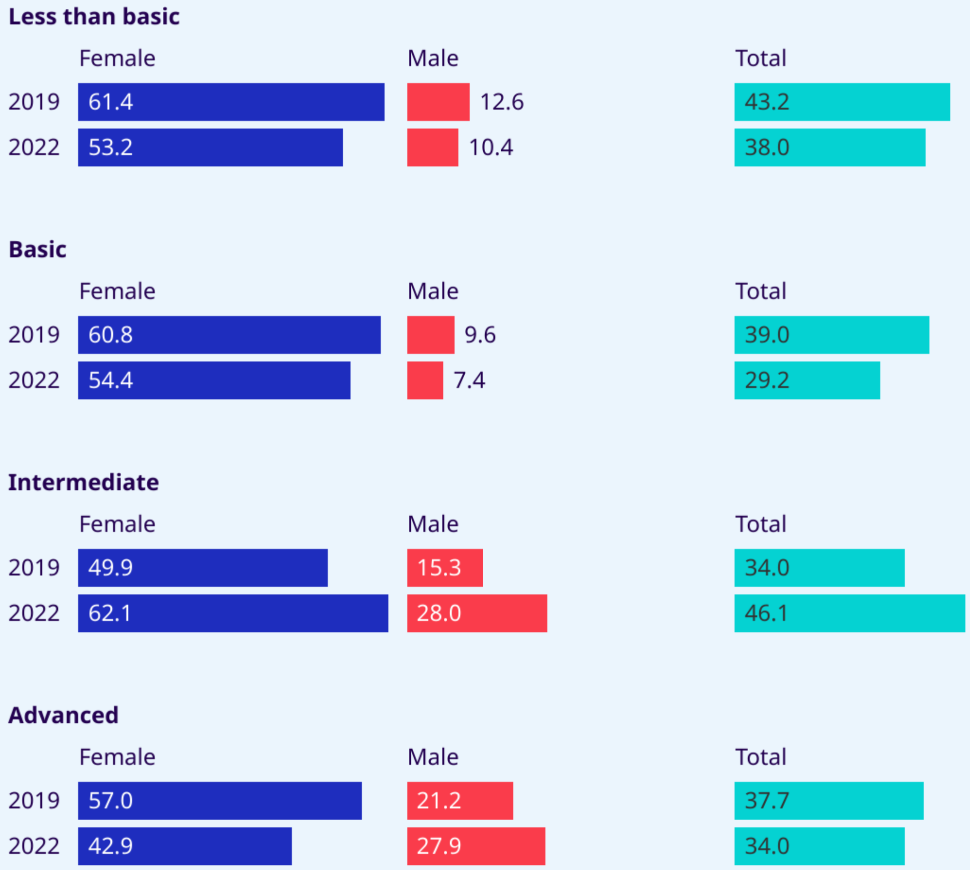
[16] The sample size of persons with disabilities is typically rather small in the household surveys, and even smaller for the age group of 15 to 29. This small sample size means that the estimates of indicators for youth with disabilities are necessarily relatively imprecise.

3.3 Educational attainment

The gender gap in educational participation and attainment was observed above. One way in which this is important is in determining young people's access to labour markets. Globally, NEET rates amongst young people are significantly higher amongst young people with lower levels of educational attainment (O'Higgins et al. 2023). This relationship tends to be less pronounced in low- and lower-middle-income countries, with significant variation across countries. Educational attainment is another key dimension of vulnerability in the youth labour market. In Mali, NEET rates do not decline with higher education. In 2022, the NEET rate among young adults aged 25–29 with an intermediate level of education was 46.1 per cent, which was the highest NEET incidence among all education groups (figure 7). By contrast, those with less than basic and basic education levels had rates of 38.0 per cent and 29.2 per cent respectively. This suggests a significant educational mismatch. Youth who obtain secondary school qualifications are not finding jobs commensurate with their education, leading many to end up without jobs or not involved in education or training.

In essence, rising education attainment in Mali has not been matched by an expansion in suitable employment opportunities. This has left a worrying number of educated young people stuck without work or further training. More education in itself does not create more jobs. There are signs of the emergence of educational mismatch, as discussed in recent editions of the ILO's Global Employment Trends for Youth (ILO, 2020b, 2024).

▶ **Figure 7. NEET rates of young people (aged 25–29) educational attainment in Mali, 2019 and 2022 (percentage)**

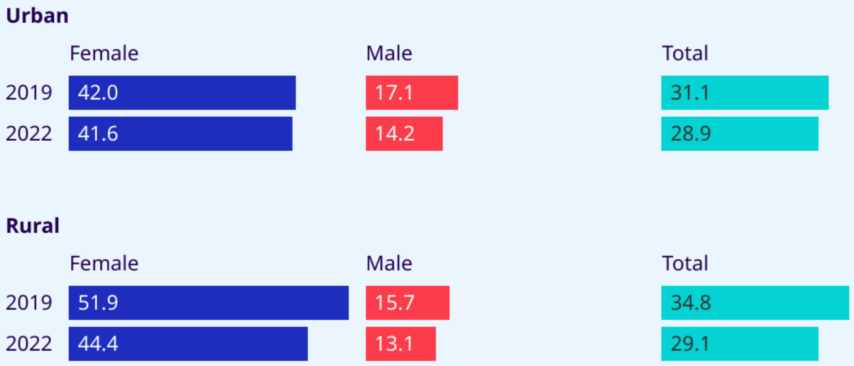


Note: Youth is defined as young people aged 25-29 when analysing educational attainment. Educational attainment is defined here based on the [ILO aggregation of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)] designed to produce a simple classification of individual educational attainment which is comparable across countries. Broadly speaking: **Basic** educational attainment corresponds to the completion of primary or lower secondary education; **Intermediate**, to the completion of upper secondary education; and **Advanced,** to the completion of tertiary educational studies.
Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/

3.4 Urban-Rural location

Globally, across all country income levels, NEET rates tend to be higher in rural areas than in urban ones. Geography is often an important factor in youth labour outcomes,. In Mali, however, urban and rural youth exhibit very similar NEET rates overall. In 2022, the youth NEET rate in both urban and rural areas was roughly 29 per cent. (figure 8). This parity suggests that the lack of opportunities is pervasive across the country. That said, there are some nuances by gender: young women in rural areas have a slightly higher NEET rate (44.4 per cent) compared to young women in urban areas (41.6 per cent). For young men, urban and rural NEET rates are both much lower and relatively close to each other – 14.2 per cent and 13.1 per cent respectively in 2022. The urban–rural gap, although small, among females may reflect more educational or service-sector opportunities for women in cities. Overall, Mali's youth employment challenge is national in scope – rural areas struggle with subsistence agriculture and isolation, while urban areas face a lack of formal jobs and continued insecurity, yielding similarly high youth inactivity.

Figure 8. NEET rates of young people (aged 15–29) by geographical location in Mali by sex, 2019 and 2022 (percentage)



Note: Youth is defined as young people aged 15-29
Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), available in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/

4. Summary and conclusions

Mali's youth labour market reflects a combination of structural and situational challenges. Rapid youth population growth is outpacing the expansion of Decent Work opportunities, placing increasing pressure on the labour market.

Employment remains heavily concentrated in agriculture, with nearly universal informality. The vast majority of young people work in low-productivity informal farm or trade activities, with very few in formal wage jobs.

Gender disparities in youth employment and NEET status are among the highest in WAEMU, with young women especially disadvantaged. Youth with disabilities, a small group, face extremely high inactivity rates, which compound their exclusion.

Improvements in educational attainment have not translated into better outcomes. The school-to-work transition is weak, especially at the upper-secondary level. This is evidenced by higher NEET rates among more educated youth, indicating a serious mismatch between the skills youth acquire and the jobs available.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54394/00034414