

YOUTH AI SURVEY 2026

WORK, STUDY & LEISURE IN THE
AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

ZIMBABWE

COUNTRY POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief presents country-specific findings from the Youth AI Survey 2026, a multi-country study examining how young people aged 18-35 use, experience, and think about artificial intelligence. Conducted globally by Restless Development, the University of Cambridge Centre for Human-Inspired Artificial Intelligence, and Makerere University, the survey collected 1,864 responses from young people, primarily in Africa and South Asia, with the United Kingdom serving as a high-income country comparator.

This brief is intended for national governments, in-country NGO partners, international funders, technology companies, and youth organisations working in Zimbabwe. It draws on country-level data to surface actionable findings and recommendations within the Zimbabwean context.

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1. INTRODUCTION & COUNTRY CONTEXT

Country Context

A young population characterised by a digital divide. Over the past 5 years (2020-2025), the population increased by 11.13%, from 15.39 million to 17.11 million people, driven by a high birth rate of roughly 497,000 births per year. World Bank data show the rise of internet use, with digital reports placing internet penetration at 42%, while social media use is at 12.5% of the population, and mobile connections exceed the total population, as one individual may possess 2 or more SIM cards. Agriculture, mining and manufacturing remain the key industries, while digital commerce and mobile connectivity are increasingly important to the economy.

Despite great strides to accelerate the digital footprint, advancements in AI law, policy, and strategy are still emerging. Zimbabwe launched a National AI Strategy (2026-2030) in March 2026. The strategy seeks to transform Zimbabwe into a knowledge-driven economy, further cemented in the National Development Strategy (NDS2) as an enabler of development. The strategy is built on six interconnected pillars: Economic transformation & Sovereignty; Inclusive development & Citizen Dignity; AI talent & Capacity Development; Governance, Ethics & Regulatory Framework; Research, Development & Innovation; and International Collaboration & Diplomacy. Through this strategy, Zimbabwe prioritises human-centric AI that upholds dignity, rights, and public trust, ensuring equitable access to AI benefits across rural and marginalised communities while advancing socio-economic progress in health, education and climate resilience. POTRAZ recently launched the 2026 AI for Impact challenge, focused on real-world public impact, and it is open to developers, startups, researchers, universities, and innovation hubs. The purpose of the challenge is to promote innovation and locally led AI systems for national development.

Research studies conducted in Zimbabwe indicate increased adoption of AI tools across higher education, libraries, newsrooms, and businesses. Universities use AI tools such as Chatbots, Plagiarism Tools, and Teaching Assistant Pro to support distance learning and student communication. With positive feedback being received from students, alluding to the fact that AI Chatbots improve learning experiences, help overcome skill gaps, and aid in test preparation. However, AI tools present risks. A study conducted in 2025, a case study of the University of Zimbabwe, found that 32% of undergraduate students have become heavily reliant on AI, creating a generative dependency that significantly impairs writing skills, critical thinking, and content knowledge.

The adoption of AI has been generally low across different fields and sectors due to weak infrastructure, low digital literacy, and financial concerns. For young people, the most relevant platforms remain mobile-first services and mainstream social media. A population-based survey found heavy use of Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram, and near-universal phone ownership; however, there are major gaps in internet and social media access, especially for vulnerable and less educated youth. Rural communities face a digital divide due to limited internet connectivity, power issues, and lack of digital skills, leaving many rural schools and communities technology-based, with limited access to mobile phones or internet connectivity, and thus decades behind the rest of the world. The primary beneficiaries are urban dwellers, educated professionals, and businesses with access to digital infrastructure and capital.

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Country Context

AI uptake in Zimbabwe will likely be shaped by access constraints, affordability, and urban-rural inequality, rather than by technology alone, underscoring the importance of understanding how young people experience AI-enabled platforms, information, work, and learning in settings where many remain offline or underconnected. A total of 121 young people aged 18-35 years in Zimbabwe participated in the survey conducted from the 4th to the 22nd of March 2026.

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AI is like a tourist who has only read one guidebook and now assumes they know your city better than you do. AI is biased because it is trained predominantly on English-language internet data, which underrepresents local languages and cultures.

24-YEAR-OLD FEMALE STUDENT SEEKING WORK, URBAN AREA, ZIMBABWE



2. ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

Gender Distribution

The Zimbabwe sample comprised 121 young people aged 18–35 years. Respondents were relatively young, with the largest proportion falling within the 24–29-year age group (43%), followed by those aged 18–23 years (32%) and 30–35 years (25%). This distribution suggests that the survey largely captured the experiences and perspectives of young people navigating transitions between education, employment, and economic participation. The predominance of respondents aged 24–29 years means the sample largely reflects young people navigating critical transitions into employment, entrepreneurship, independent living, and family formation. Their perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding future economic and technological opportunities.

Educational attainment among respondents was comparatively high. More than half of the sample (51%) reported having attained a bachelor's degree or postgraduate qualification, while approximately one-third (32%) had completed high school education as their highest level of education. Smaller proportions reported holding diploma-level qualifications, vocational or technical training certificates, or primary-level education. The relatively high concentration of tertiary-educated respondents indicates a sample with substantial formal educational exposure and suggests that it may be more digitally connected, information-rich, and more likely to engage with emerging technologies than the average young person.

The respondents' profile further reflected a diverse mix of geographic locations and economic activities. Participants were drawn from urban, peri-urban, and rural communities, providing representation across different settlement contexts and levels of access to services and opportunities. Respondents were engaged in a range of primary activities, including studying, formal employment, self-employment, volunteering, and seeking work, highlighting the varied livelihood pathways pursued by young people in Zimbabwe. Compared with the broader 11-country sample, Zimbabwe's contribution to young people with disabilities is non-existent.

121% Total respondents	58% females	68% Urban dwellers
43% Aged 24 - 29	51% Bachelor's degree or above	39% Currently studying or employed

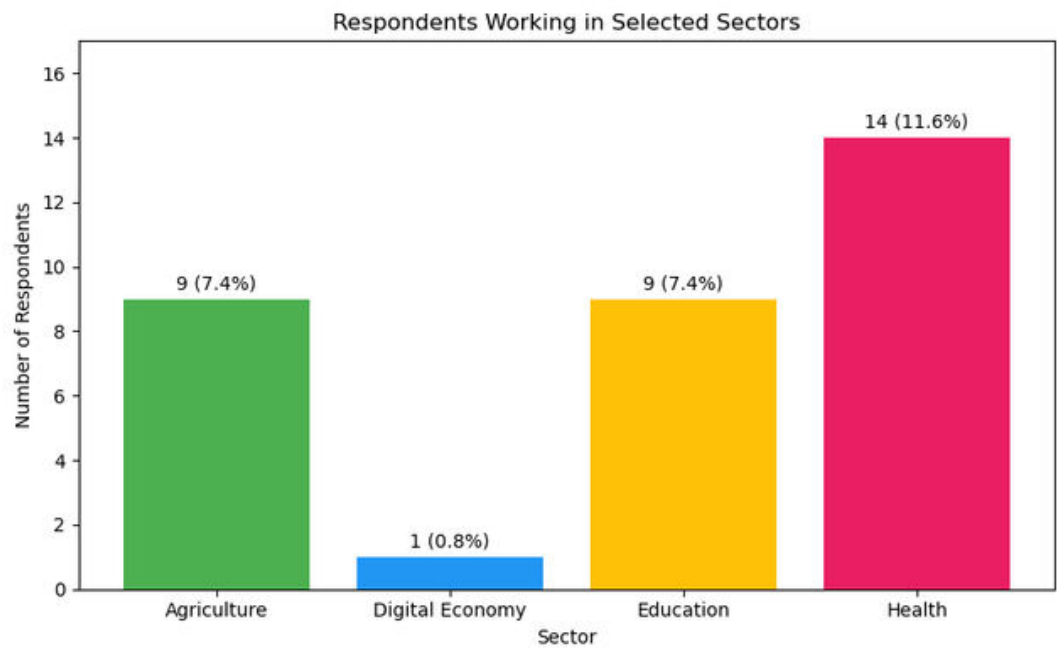


Figure 1: Respondents Working in Selected Sectors

3. HOW YOUNG PEOPLE IN ZIMBABWE USE AI

The use of AI in Zimbabwe is average: 43% say they sometimes use it, 29% say they use it a lot, and 24% say they use it a little. Urban dwellers are the largest group of AI users, accounting for 25% of the 29% who use it a lot, with half (8%) of young people living in rural areas using AI a little. The majority (79%) of the young people use AI for educational purposes, while 54% use it for social media and 45% for work. Female respondents use AI mostly for education (43%) and social media (34%), while males use it education (35%) and work (21%).

The least use of AI among young people is seeking government services, e.g., taxes, which accounts for only 7%. The data shows a significant gender difference in social media use, with a 14% difference, the highest recorded difference between the two genders across the use of AI. Males seem to use AI in a slightly more functional and task-oriented way across more domains.

There is not much difference in AI use across the three geographical locations, as the top three uses are education, work, and social media as indicated in figure 2.

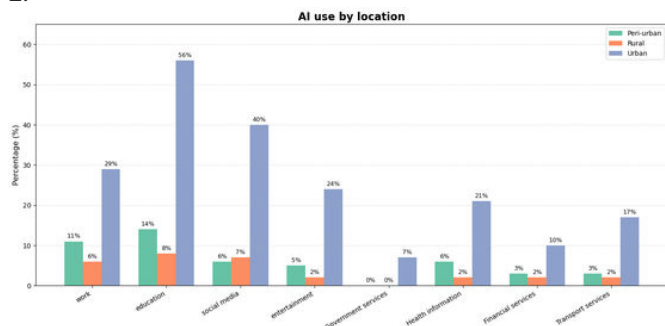


Figure 2: AI use by location

Uses such as financial services, transport/navigation, and government services appear less common among young people in rural areas; therefore, they seem to use AI in a more basic, narrower way.

Most respondents use AI daily, with 41% living in urban areas. It is important to note that rural and peri-urban dwellers also recorded their highest daily use figures. With them recording 6% and 12% respectively.



"I use ChatGPT to help me perfect my daily work report, and I use ChatGPT when I need help with academic research."

22-YEAR-OLD, FEMALE STUDENT, URBAN AREA

59 %
Of Zimbabwe respondents
use AI daily

11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK
11-country survey average: 64%

Key Findings: AI Use Patterns

- **Primary use:** Learning new skills is the most common AI use in Zimbabwe at 76%, consistent with the 11-country pattern but above the survey average of 60%.
- **Income gap:** Despite widespread AI engagement, only 9% of Zimbabwe's respondents report earning income directly through AI- below the survey average of 14%. The gap between learning/use and direct income generation remains significant.
- **Rural lag:** Rural respondents in Zimbabwe show lower AI uptake across all uses. 2% of rural respondents have never used AI, compared with 0% in urban areas.
- **Gender gap:** The largest gender gap in Zimbabwe is in using AI to find work, where 21% of females report using AI for this purpose compared to 7% of males - a gap of 14 percentage points, contrasting the 11-country finding, as more males used AI to find work with a 16 percentage point difference.

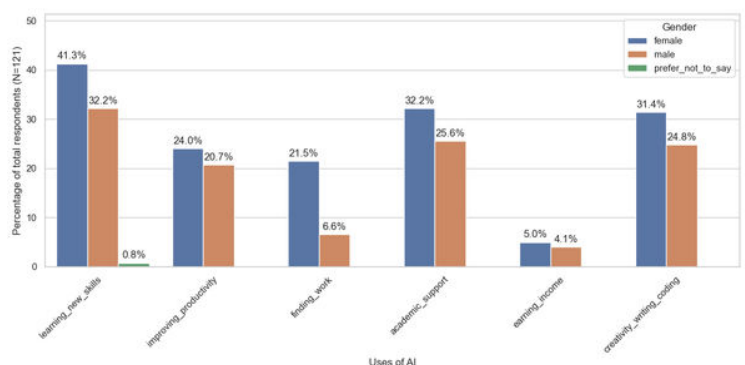


Figure 3: Uses of AI disaggregated by gender

4. WHO BENEFITS, WHO DOESN'T?

AI benefits are unevenly distributed in Zimbabwe, creating a clear divide between urban and rural dwellers. Urban residents, who have greater access to internet connectivity, computing power, and digital skills, can effectively use AI to improve efficiency in learning, professional environments, and business operations. However, significant challenges remain for those who live in peri-urban and rural areas. Barriers to accessing AI

According to the data, the top barriers to accessing AI are data costs and weak connectivity.

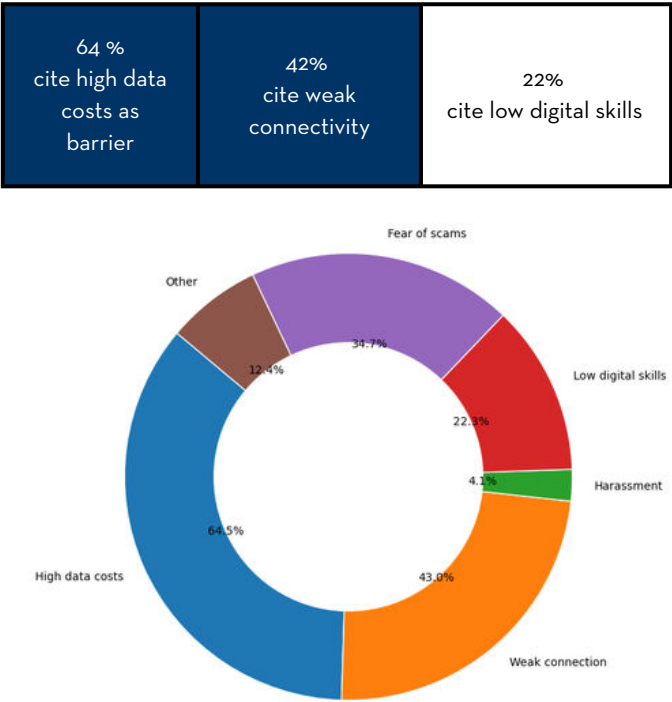


Figure 4: Barriers affecting the use of AI

Apart from high data costs and weak connectivity, fear of scams ranked 3rd among barriers to using AI. Fear of scams is an emerging barrier, as previous studies shaped AI scepticism differently in the Zimbabwean context. The scepticism has been mainly shaped by the lack of confidence that the current education would help them secure jobs in AI-related fields. The fear of scams when using AI may stem from the increasing number of hacks on Facebook and WhatsApp, where the majority of young people are active, leading them to fear that such hacks and scams may occur when they use AI.

Gender Gaps in AI Knowledge & Economic Impact

There are gender gaps in AI knowledge and economic impact. Females constituted 58% of respondents, but their AI- related activities are concentrated into 2 categories, unlike males, whose AI activities are spread across 4 categories as depicted by Figure 4. Females’ AI activities are mostly centred on using AI tools and building products. While males lead in developing AI models and training AI data sets categories. More females than males don’t know how to use AI.

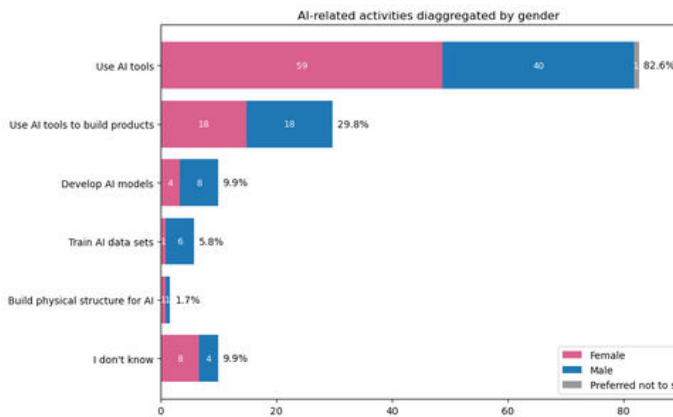


Figure 5: AI-related activities done by young people, disaggregated by gender.

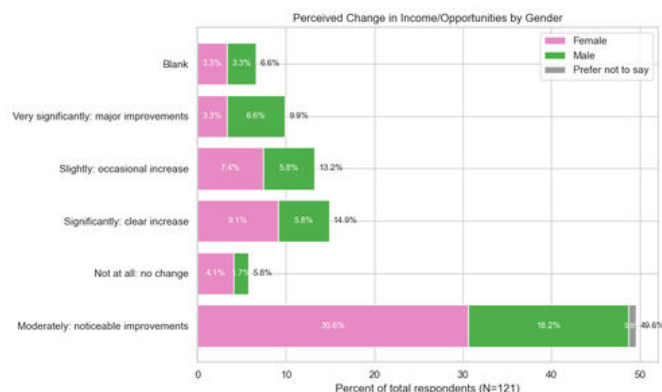


Figure 6: Perceived change in Income through AI, disaggregated by gender.

The statistical figure above shows a 6 percentage-point knowledge gap between males and females, with females lagging behind. More females stated they know “some”, “little” and “nothing”. Yet males were more confident in their AI knowledge.

“Some AI tools sound like privilege, since most young people have no access to the internet, as it is costly in Zimbabwe.”

FEMALE EDUCATOR, 32-YEAR-OLD, URBAN AREA

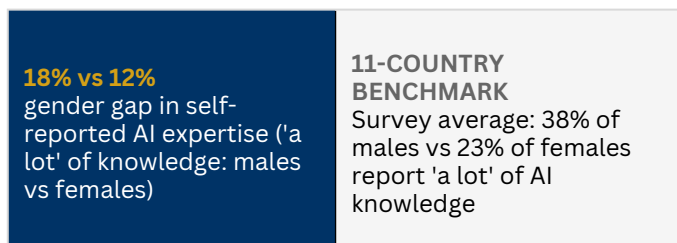


Figure 7: Self-reported AI knowledge, disaggregated by location

The digital divide is more evident on this, as only 2% of young people from the rural areas account for the 29% of young people who stated they know “a lot”; the majority of them stated they know “a little”, thus constituting the big chunk of those who know “nothing”. Thus, it is the peri-urban and rural young people who lag behind in AI knowledge.



5. YOUNG PEOPLE'S AI CONCERNS

The top four AI tools and services used by males and females are

Males	Females
1.AI-generated content in social media (32%)	1.AI-generated content in social media (52%)
2.Chatbots (26%)	2.Chatbots (21%)
3.Virtual assistance (17%)	3.Virtual assistance (21%)
4.Educational platforms (17%)	4.Health care services (21%)

The top 3 services are similar across genders, with females pivoting towards health services and males focusing on educational platforms. Almost every female participant in the survey uses AI-generated content on social media. Figure 7 indicates that the respondents felt AI does not address their needs, with males contributing more to this finding.

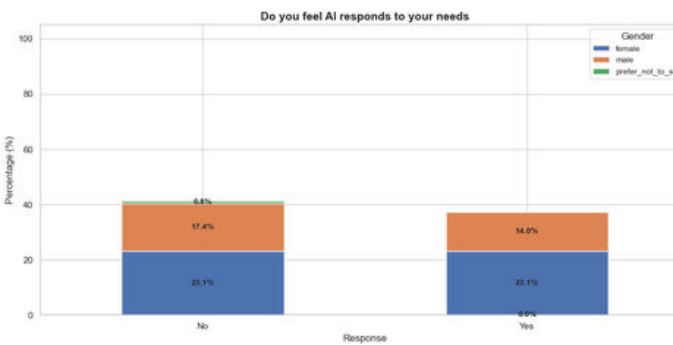


Figure 9: How young people feel about how AI responds to their needs, disaggregated by gender

The use of AI raises significant concern among young people, as illustrated in Figure 8.

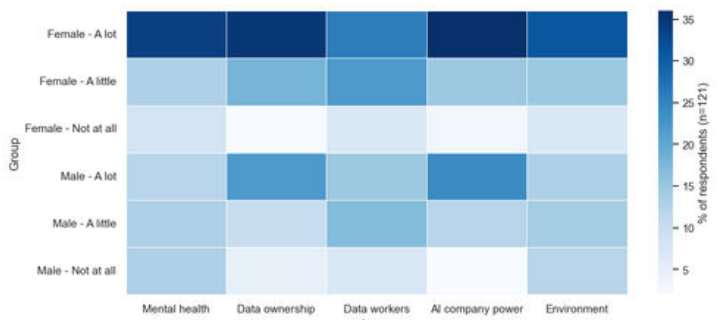


Figure 8: Young people's concerns for AI, disaggregated by gender.

- Females consistently accounted for a larger proportion of respondents who expressed high concern ("A lot") across all five AI governance issues than males did. For example, 36% of respondents who expressed great concern about the power of AI companies were females, compared with 24% of males.
- Concern about the power of AI companies emerged as the highest-rated issue overall.
- Data ownership was also a major concern, with 36% of females reporting great concern, compared with 22% of males. Overall, 58% of respondents expressed great concern regarding data ownership.
- Mental health and well-being exhibited one of the strongest gender differences. Overall, 34% of females reported great concern, compared with 12% of males. Conversely, 13% of males reported no concern at all, compared with 8.3% of females.
- Environmental impact also showed gender disparity. Overall, 31% of respondents were female and expressed great concern, compared with 13% of males. Meanwhile, 12% of males reported no concern, compared with 7% of females.
- Concerns regarding the working conditions of AI data workers were more evenly distributed, although females remained more concerned than males. Overall, 26% of females reported great concern, compared with 15% of males. Moderate concern ("A little") was reported by 22% of females and 17% of males.

The findings suggest that young people who use AI daily are generally more aware of its broader societal and ethical implications than those who use it less frequently. Across all five AI governance issues examined, daily users consistently reported higher levels of concern. The largest difference was observed in data ownership, where 70% of daily users expressed strong concern, compared with 49% of non-daily users. Overall, the findings indicate that greater engagement with AI is associated with increased awareness of issues relating to privacy, corporate accountability, labour rights, environmental sustainability, and well-being.

Misinformation & Safety

[72]% concerned about AI misinformation	[40]% say safety concerns limit their AI use	[61]% want stronger laws on AI
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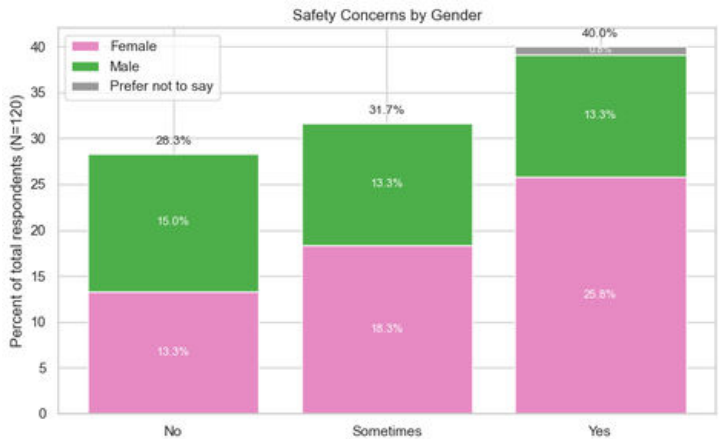


Figure 10: Safety concerns disaggregated by gender



"ALTHOUGH THERE ARE CONCERNS ABOUT WHO OWNS THE DATA WE SHARE THROUGH AI TOOLS, I'M SURE THAT WITH STRONG LAWS AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING, WE CAN HAVE TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN AI TOOLS."

28-YEAR-OLD, FEMALE, SEEKING WORK, URBAN AREA)

What Would Make AI Safer?

61 % stated
stronger laws and
regulations

Zimbabwean respondents identified “stronger laws and regulations” as the most important measure for making AI safer.

Respondents also emphasised the need for “greater accountability” of AI platforms, increased digital literacy, improved reporting mechanisms, and community awareness initiatives to help users better understand and manage AI-related risks. In addition, respondents highlighted the importance of designing AI systems that are inclusive and responsive to females' needs. Open-ended responses further underscored the need for greater transparency in AI decision-making, stronger safeguards against misinformation, and AI systems that better reflect local languages and cultural contexts. Overall, the findings demonstrate strong public support for a balanced approach that combines regulation, accountability, public education, and inclusive AI development to ensure the safe and responsible use of AI in Zimbabwe.

6. EMPLOYMENT, FUTURES & SENTIMENT

AI is capable of taking over my future career hence leading to no income for me."

18-year-old female, urban, student

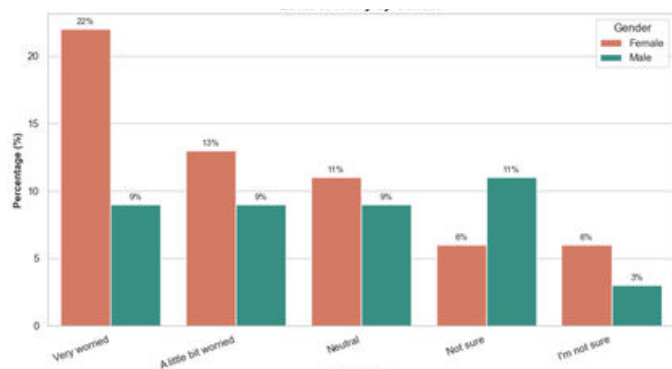


FIGURE 11: LEVELS OF WORRY ON AI FOR THE NEXT 5 YEARS, DISAGGREGATED BY GENDER

A significant percentage of females are very worried about what will happen in the coming five years, while most males are unsure. Respondents widely fear AI-driven job displacement, especially in technical and analytical roles, while human-centric professions like medicine feel more secure. Two views emerge: AI as an existential threat versus a productivity enhancer. Many emphasise that AI cannot automate empathy or ethical judgment, yet feel pressured to learn AI skills, fearing obsolescence. Concerns include the erosion of craftsmanship, income instability among creatives, and the questioning of the relevance of degrees. Some state that AI lacks human authenticity, while others see AI as inevitable, with effective use creating an advantage. Three groups were identified: pessimists (40%), pragmatists (35%), and optimists (25%). Security correlates with the requirements for interpersonal skills, willingness to learn AI, and belief in human irreplaceability.

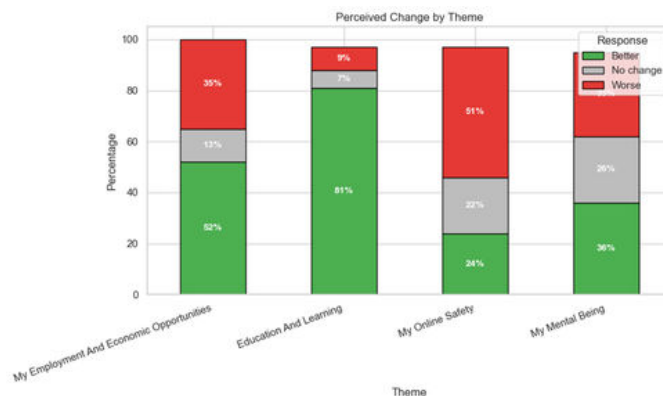


FIGURE 12: PERCEIVED CHANGE AND IMPACT OVER 5 YEARS ON THEMES AFTER USING AI

81%
Of Zimbabwe respondents expect AI to have a positive impact on education & learning in the next 5 years

11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK
11-country average: 71% expect a positive impact on education

The data shows a mixed picture across the four themes. Education and learning stand out as the strongest areas of improvement. Employment and economic opportunities also show an overall positive trend, with 52% saying they will improve, though a substantial 35% feel they will worsen, suggesting progress may not be experienced equally by everyone.

In contrast, online safety is the most concerning area, indicating that negative experiences outweigh positive ones. Mental well-being presents a more divided picture: 36% report improvement, 26% no change, and 33% say it will worsen. Overall, the findings suggest that gains will be strongest in education and somewhat positive in employment, while online safety and mental well-being remain significant areas of concern.

7. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Zimbabwe is at a pivotal juncture, as the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) is actively reshaping economic and educational prospects. However, access to AI technologies remains significantly disparate. Survey findings indicate that AI is not closing the technological gap; rather, it reinforces pre-existing disparities across geographic regions, gender, and socioeconomic strata.

While 59% of young Zimbabweans utilise AI daily and 79% leverage it for educational purposes, these figures reveal a concerning reality as urban populations exhibit higher AI adoption rates. Furthermore, a persistent income-generation gap persists despite widespread engagement in AI learning, with only 9% of the young people reporting earning income directly through AI, thus suggesting a significant impediment in translating skill acquisition into tangible economic benefits for the majority of young people. This disconnect between learning and livelihood is particularly pronounced in rural and peri-urban areas, where inadequate connectivity (cited by 42% as a barrier) and exorbitant data costs (64%) pose obstacles to participation in the digital economy envisioned by Zimbabwe's National AI Strategy (2026-2030).

Gender dynamics further complicate Zimbabwe's AI landscape, revealing that females' engagement with AI, though quantitatively substantial, differs qualitatively and yields fewer economic rewards than that of males. Females constitute 58% of respondents but demonstrate a notable lag in AI knowledge. Females primarily focus their AI activities on tool utilisation rather than on the higher-value domains of model development and data work, where males are concentrated.

Crucially, females identify safety concerns and fear of scams as primary impediments to AI use, implying that the digital infrastructure itself is perceived as hostile and untrustworthy by female users. Concurrently, the paradox that daily AI users express the greatest concern about AI risks, particularly regarding data ownership (70% of daily users versus 49% of non-users), suggests that familiarity fosters informed scepticism rather than comfort. Young Zimbabweans believe AI mostly helps corporates and city dwellers, while everyone else faces the risks. Therefore, they want stronger laws and greater accountability for AI to address this unfairness.

These intersecting patterns suggest that Zimbabwe's AI future will be determined not solely by technology adoption rates, but by the nation's capacity to address the structural inequalities that currently dictate who benefits and who bears the risks. The National AI Strategy's commitment to human-centric AI and equitable access remains aspirational without urgent intervention in digital infrastructure, data affordability, digital literacy and gender-responsive AI design.

The window to steer Zimbabwe's AI trajectory towards equity requires coordinated action across governmental bodies, technology companies, and civil society to ensure that AI serves as a catalyst for broad-based development rather than a mechanism for solidifying existing disadvantages.

- Prioritise rural digital Infrastructure as a foundation for AI equity - This should include targeted support for community digital hubs in rural areas that provide free or low-cost internet access, particularly in schools and libraries, enabling young people to develop AI literacy regardless of household income.
- Integrate Gender-Responsive AI Capacity Building into Education and Skills Programs- Government should mandate AI curricula that actively encourage girls' participation in technical AI training, data science, and model development.
- Establish a National AI Governance Framework with Youth Participation - Government must move beyond strategy to enforcement. They must develop and implement comprehensive AI governance regulations that include: mandatory data protection standards aligned with the African Union's frameworks, transparent mechanisms for algorithmic accountability, and safeguards against discriminatory AI systems.
- Create Pathways from AI Learning to Economic Opportunity - Government should establish an AI-focused entrepreneurship fund and business incubation program specifically for young people aged 18-35, with preferential access for rural youth and females. There should be subsidised access to AI tools, mentorship from AI professionals, and connections to markets where AI-enhanced services are in demand (e.g., agricultural advisory services, financial inclusion platforms, healthcare information systems)
- Regulate broadband service costs to 2% of monthly Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, as it currently accounts for 12.9%. This is a target set by the Broadband Commission for Sustainable
- Development to ensure that connectivity costs are low enough to drive meaningful universal adoption, particularly in developing countries where high costs remain a significant barrier to internet use.

- Develop affordable, lightweight, offline-capable AI tools optimised for low-bandwidth, mobile-first environments. Telecommunications companies should partner with local private companies to offer discounted AI bundles for education and livelihoods. Crucially, AI tools must support local languages and cultural contexts, not just translated English, to truly serve Zimbabwean communities
- Create accessible pathways for young Zimbabweans, especially females and rural youth, to monetise AI skills through freelancing, affiliate programs, or direct employment. Pathways should include offering free or subsidised training on AI tools for income generation (e.g., content creation, data annotation, customer service automation).
- Commit to accountable AI development aligned with local values by publishing transparency reports on data use and algorithmic decision-making, establishing local advisory boards with young Zimbabweans, and conducting human rights impact assessments before launching new AI services. They should also support independent research on AI's impact in Zimbabwean contexts and commit to addressing identified harms.

- Launch a coordinated national AI literacy campaign for rural and marginalised youth. The campaign involves radio and mobile-based content in local languages, community-led digital literacy initiatives, and the integration of AI literacy into secondary school curricula. Funders should prioritise grants for rural organisations, and academia should develop and freely distribute open-source, locally adapted AI learning materials through libraries, schools, and community centres.
- Establish multi-stakeholder platforms for ongoing youth-led AI governance dialogue. All sectors must create formal mechanisms for young people, especially females and rural youth, to participate in governance discussions. Participation includes annual youth AI policy forums, youth representation on government AI advisory bodies, and funding for youth-led civil society organisations to conduct AI equity research and advocacy.
- Create Accountability Mechanisms for AI's Gender and Spatial Equity Impacts: This includes disaggregated data collection on AI access, skills, and income generation by gender and location, as well as gender and spatial equity audits of AI products and services.



AI WILL ONLY POSITIVELY AFFECT MY INCOME SOURCES BECAUSE I'VE ALREADY STARTED LEARNING TO USE AI. I BELIEVE IT'S NOT AI THAT WILL TAKE OVER OUR JOBS, BUT PEOPLE USING AI FOR BETTER PRODUCTIVITY

23-YEAR-OLD MALE, URBAN, STUDENT

- Amplify Young People's Voices in AI Governance and Policy Advocacy - Restless Development should leverage this survey data to establish a youth-led AI advocacy movement in Zimbabwe that demands equitable AI development and governance. Support should include supporting young people to present findings to government, technology companies, and international forums, creating platforms for young Zimbabweans to articulate their AI concerns and aspirations.
- Pilot Locally-led AI Skills and Livelihoods Programs in Partnership with Communities - Restless Development should work with young people and community organisations to co-design AI skills programs that address local economic opportunities and constraints.
- Build Evidence on what works for AI Equity and Share Learnings across contexts - Restless Development should position itself as a learning organisation that generates and shares evidence on effective approaches to AI equity in African contexts. Evidence should include conducting follow-up research on the effectiveness of different interventions (e.g., rural digital hubs, female AI bootcamps, governance reforms), documenting case studies of young Zimbabweans who have successfully navigated AI opportunities and publishing accessible resources (briefs, toolkits, policy recommendations) that other organisations and governments can adapt.
- Support Gender-Transformative AI Initiatives that challenge male dominance in technical roles. This includes mentorship programs that pair young females with female AI professionals, safe spaces for females to learn technical AI skills without fear of harassment or scams, advocacy for gender-responsive AI product design, and research on barriers to females' participation in AI, with a focus on Zimbabwean contexts.

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