

Title

**EXAMINING THE IMPACTS OF CASUAL LABOUR ON THE MENTAL HEALTH
OF YOUTH IN URBAN MALAWI: A CASE STUDY OF CHILINDE, LILONGWE**

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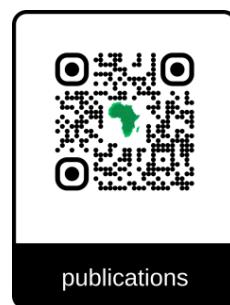
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ABSTRACT

Youth unemployment and economic vulnerability have compelled many young people in urban Malawi to engage in casual labour (ganyu) as a primary means of survival. While ganyu provides short-term income, its implications for youth mental health remain inadequately explored. This study examined the impacts of casual labour on the mental health of youth in Chilinde, an urban settlement in Lilongwe, Malawi. A qualitative exploratory design was employed, involving indepth interviews with 20 youths aged 15–24 years engaged in casual labour. Data were analysed thematically to examine socio-economic drivers of ganyu, mental health outcomes, coping mechanisms, and the role of social support.

Findings indicate that poverty, unemployment, limited educational opportunities, and early family responsibilities are the main factors pushing youth into casual labour. Engagement in ganyu was associated with stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms, largely due to irregular income, physically demanding work, and exploitative labour conditions. Youth relied on informal coping strategies such as family and peer support, prayer, rest, and leisure activities, although some reported alcohol use. Social support played a protective role; however, the absence of structured mental health services and youth empowerment programmes increased vulnerability. The study concludes that casual labour is a survival strategy with significant negative implications for youth mental health and recommends integrated economic and psychosocial interventions.

Keywords: casual labour, ganyu, youth mental health, informal employment, Malawi

INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges facing SubSaharan Africa. In Malawi, limited formal employment opportunities have pushed many young people into informal and casual labour, commonly known as ganyu (*Chirwa & Chunga, 2020*). Ganyu involves short-term, irregular work that is often poorly paid, physically demanding, and lacking legal protection (*Holden et al., 2016*). Although it provides immediate income, it exposes youth to economic insecurity and exploitative working conditions.

Mental health is a critical component of youth development and social well-being. According to the World Health Organization (*WHO, 2018a*), mental health challenges among youth are strongly influenced by socio-economic stressors such as poverty, unemployment, and unstable livelihoods. Studies conducted in African urban contexts show that informal employment is associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among young people (*Lund et al., 2018; Patel et al., 2018*).

In Malawi, empirical evidence on the mental health consequences of casual labour remains limited, particularly in urban communities such as Chilinde in Lilongwe. Youth in Chilinde face daily economic pressures, early family responsibilities, and social expectations to contribute financially, placing them at heightened risk of psychological distress (*Banda et al., 2019*). Understanding how casual labour affects youth mental health is essential for informing social work practice, youth policy, and community-based interventions.

This study therefore examines the impacts of casual labour on the mental health of youth in Chilinde, focusing on socio-economic drivers, mental health outcomes, coping mechanisms, and social support systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Casual Labour and Youth Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa

Casual labour plays a central role in sustaining livelihoods for millions of urban youth across Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in contexts characterized by high unemployment and limited formal sector opportunities. Informal employment accounts for more than 80% of youth employment in many low-income countries, serving as both a survival strategy and a coping mechanism against extreme poverty (*International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021*). In Malawi, ganyu represents one of the most common forms of informal labour, particularly among young people living in high-density urban settlements.

Studies indicate that youth engagement in casual labour is driven by structural inequalities such as limited access to education, economic marginalization, and weak labour market institutions (*Chirwa & Chunga, 2020*). While casual labour provides short-term income, it is often unstable, unpredictable, and insufficient to meet basic needs. As a result, youths engaged in ganyu remain trapped in cycles of poverty and economic vulnerability, limiting their long-term social mobility.

Informal Employment and Mental Health

A growing body of literature links informal employment to poor mental health outcomes. Research from low- and middle-income countries demonstrates that precarious work

arrangements are associated with chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (*Lund et al., 2018*). The absence of job security, legal protection, and predictable income contributes significantly to psychological distress, particularly among young people who already face social and economic pressures.

In urban African contexts, informal work has been linked to feelings of hopelessness, low self-worth, and social exclusion (*Moyo, 2019*). Youth engaged in casual labour often experience stigma and discrimination, which further undermines their mental well-being. These experiences are compounded by physically demanding working conditions, long hours, and exposure to exploitation by employers.

Youth Mental Health in Urban Malawi

Mental health among Malawian youth remains an under-researched area, despite increasing evidence of psychological distress linked to poverty and unemployment. *Banda et al. (2019)* found that urban youth engaged in casual labour reported high levels of stress, emotional fatigue, and depressive symptoms. The lack of accessible mental health services and limited awareness of mental health issues further exacerbate the problem.

Urban settlements such as Chilinde are characterized by overcrowding, limited access to social services, and high living costs, all of which contribute to psychological strain among young people. Youth are often expected to support their families financially, increasing pressure to engage in income-generating activities regardless of working conditions. These realities highlight the importance of examining the intersection between casual labour and youth mental health in urban Malawi.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Social Stress Theory (*Pearlin, 1989*), which explains how exposure to persistent stressors such as poverty, unemployment, and insecure work conditions leads to adverse mental health outcomes. According to the theory, individuals who lack adequate economic and social resources are more vulnerable to psychological distress due to limited coping capacity.

Youth engaged in casual labour experience multiple stressors, including financial insecurity, exploitative working conditions, and social stigma. These stressors accumulate over time, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Social support systems, such as family and peer networks, can buffer the negative effects of stress; however, their protective role is limited in the absence of structural interventions.

By applying Social Stress Theory, this study provides a framework for understanding how structural socio-economic factors shape youth engagement in casual labour and influence mental health outcomes in urban Malawi.

Methods Study Design

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to capture the lived experiences of youth engaged in casual labour. This approach was appropriate for exploring subjective mental health experiences and social realities that cannot be adequately quantified (*Creswell, 2014*).

Study Setting

The research was conducted in Chilinde, a densely populated urban area in Lilongwe,

Malawi. Chilinde is characterised by high poverty levels, unemployment, and widespread engagement in informal economic activities, particularly among youth.

Participants and Sampling

Twenty youths aged 15–24 years who were actively engaged in casual labour participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of individuals with direct experience of ganyu. Both male and female youths participated.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by open-ended questions.

Interviews explored participants' socio-economic backgrounds, reasons for engaging in casual labour, working conditions, mental health experiences, coping strategies, and sources of social support. Interviews were conducted in a language familiar to participants and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Transcripts were coded and organised into themes aligned with the research objectives, allowing for interpretation of recurring patterns related to mental health and coping (*Braun & Clarke, 2006*).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental consent secured for those under 18 years. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

RESULTS

Socio-Economic Drivers of Youth Participation in Casual Labour

Poverty emerged as the primary factor driving youth engagement in casual labour. Participants reported engaging in ganyu to meet basic household needs such as food and daily necessities. Limited access to education due to financial constraints forced many youths to drop out of school, reducing access to formal employment (Lewin, 2015). High levels of urban unemployment further pushed youths into informal work (Omondi *et al.*, 2017). Early family responsibilities, particularly among young women, intensified the need to earn income (Phiri *et al.*, 2019).

Mental Health Outcomes Associated with Casual Labour

Participants reported high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion resulting from long working hours and physically demanding tasks. Persistent anxiety and worry about securing daily work and meeting basic needs were common, reflecting economic insecurity (Patel *et al.*, 2018). Many youths experienced low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority due to social stigma associated with ganyu and negative treatment by employers (Moyo, 2019). Experiences of verbal abuse, exploitation, and underpayment further contributed to psychological distress (Standing, 2018).

Coping Mechanisms

Youth relied on informal coping strategies to manage stress, including emotional support from family and peers, prayer, rest, and leisure activities. Religious coping was particularly prominent and provided emotional comfort (Mwafuirwa *et al.*, 2018). However, some participants reported alcohol use as a coping mechanism, posing additional mental health risks.

Role of Social Support

Social support from family and peers played a protective role by reducing emotional strain and promoting resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Despite this, participants highlighted the absence of formal mental health services, youth programmes, and employment support initiatives, leaving many youths vulnerable.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that youth engagement in casual labour in Chilinde is largely a survival strategy shaped by structural socio-economic constraints rather than personal choice. Consistent with *Social Stress Theory* (Pearlin, 1989), prolonged exposure to poverty, unemployment, and exploitative working conditions contributes to chronic psychological stress. Similar associations between informal employment and poor mental health outcomes have been reported in Malawi and other Sub-Saharan African contexts (Chirwa & Chunga, 2020; Lund *et al.*, 2018). While informal coping mechanisms and social support provide short-term relief, they are insufficient to address long-term mental health needs. The lack of accessible mental health services and youth empowerment programmes exacerbates vulnerability and perpetuates

cycles of poverty and psychological distress.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience among Youth

While casual labour exposes youth to significant psychological strain, the study also highlighted adaptive coping strategies that contribute to resilience. Beyond family and peer support, participants engaged in informal skill-sharing networks, where older youths guided newcomers on navigating work opportunities and negotiating wages. Such peer mentorship can foster a sense of agency and mitigate feelings of helplessness.

Religious and spiritual practices were central to emotional regulation. Participants described engaging in prayer, attending church or mosque activities, and participating in faith-based youth groups as sources of hope and moral support. This aligns with prior studies showing that religious coping can provide meaning, reduce perceived stress, and enhance psychological well-being among youth in resource-limited settings (*Mwafuirwa et al., 2018*).

Leisure activities, including football, music, and cultural events, were used by some participants as temporary escapes from daily pressures. These activities offered opportunities for social interaction, identity formation, and emotional release. However, the protective effect of leisure was limited by economic constraints, as participation often required financial resources.

Notably, maladaptive coping behaviors were also reported, including alcohol use and substance experimentation. These strategies provided short-term relief from stress but carried long-term risks for mental health and social functioning. This duality underscores the need for community-based interventions that strengthen adaptive coping while addressing risky behaviors.

Gendered Experiences and Intersectionality in Casual Labour

The study's findings indicate that male and female youths experience casual labour differently, reflecting broader socio-cultural and economic inequalities. Young women faced compounded burdens due to early caregiving responsibilities, household chores, and societal expectations to contribute financially. These dual demands intensified stress, leaving young women more vulnerable to anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to their male counterparts (*Phiri et al., 2019*).

Conversely, young men often reported pressure to secure daily income to support extended family members, with social expectations linked to masculinity and breadwinning. Failure to meet these expectations generated feelings of inadequacy and social stigma, further exacerbating psychological strain.

Intersectional vulnerabilities, such as youth with disabilities or those from single-parent households, were not extensively covered in this study but are critical considerations for future research. These groups may face compounded barriers to formal employment and increased exposure to exploitative informal work, highlighting the need for tailored support mechanisms.

Role of Community Structures in Mental Health Support

Community institutions play a pivotal role in mediating the mental health effects of casual labour. In addition to families and peer networks, local youth clubs, community-based organizations, and faith groups provided informal spaces for emotional support, skills development, and social cohesion. Participants reported that engagement in community groups enhanced

problem-solving skills, built social capital, and fostered resilience.

However, such community resources were unevenly distributed, often favoring more organized or affluent neighborhoods. In Chilinde, informal structures exist but lack funding, professional oversight, and structured mental health programming. Strengthening these institutions—through capacity-building, mental health training, and partnerships with NGOs—could provide scalable interventions to improve youth psychological well-being.

Long-Term Developmental and Socio-Economic Implications

Sustained engagement in casual labour has both individual and societal consequences. At the individual level, prolonged exposure to insecure work limits opportunities for skill acquisition, vocational training, and educational advancement. Youth who remain trapped in casual labour may experience reduced social mobility, economic marginalization, and persistent psychological strain.

Over time, chronic stress during formative years can contribute to maladaptive coping patterns, such as substance abuse, social withdrawal, or aggression.

At the community and national levels, widespread youth dependence on informal employment reduces the pool of skilled labor necessary for economic growth and urban development. Moreover, poor mental health outcomes among youth can translate into lower productivity, absenteeism, and reduced participation in civic and economic activities. This perpetuates cycles of poverty, social inequity, and developmental stagnation in urban Malawi. International evidence from other Sub-Saharan countries supports these conclusions. For example, studies in Kenya and Zambia indicate that

youth who rely on informal labour without access to training or psychosocial support are more likely to experience long-term unemployment, mental health issues, and social exclusion (Omondi *et al.*, 2017; Phiri *et al.*, 2019). These cross-contextual insights reinforce the urgency of integrated interventions in Malawi.

Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

In addition to the previously outlined recommendations, this study suggests several specific measures:

- **Youth-Led Economic Initiatives:** Support for micro-enterprises, cooperative savings groups, and small business incubation programs can reduce reliance on casual labour while fostering financial independence.
- **Community-Based Mental Health Programming:** Integrate peer-led support groups, psychosocial workshops, and mobile mental health clinics into community centers to increase access for youth engaged in informal work.
- **Gender-Sensitive Interventions:** Develop targeted programs addressing the unique challenges faced by young women, such as childcare support, flexible vocational training, and safe workspaces.
- **Capacity-Building for Social Workers and Community Leaders:** Train social workers, youth mentors, and religious leaders in early detection of psychological distress, trauma-informed care, and mental health first aid.
- **Policy Integration:** Advocate for the inclusion of youth mental health in broader urban development and

employment policies. Policies should recognize the interplay between economic vulnerability and mental health to ensure holistic interventions.

CONCLUSION

Casual labour remains a critical survival strategy for urban youth in Malawi but poses significant risks to mental health. Integrated interventions that combine vocational training, youth employment programmes, and community-based mental health services are essential. Strengthening social support networks and incorporating mental health considerations into youth employment policies can improve well-being and long-term outcomes for youths engaged in informal work.

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