



CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN LILONGWE CITY, MALAWI: AN ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

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ABSTRACT :

Youth employment remains a persistent socio-economic challenge in Malawi, with urban areas such as Lilongwe City experiencing high unemployment rates despite various government and non-governmental initiatives. This study investigates the key challenges hindering sustainable youth employment in Lilongwe City and explores strategies for improvement. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining survey data from 120 youth participants with interviews from government officials, employers, and civil society representatives. Findings reveal that limited access to capital, inadequate technical and entrepreneurial skills, and a mismatch between education and labour market needs are the primary barriers to sustainable youth employment. Additionally, economic instability, limited industrial diversification, and policy implementation gaps exacerbate the problem. The study recommends strengthening vocational training programmes, enhancing access to affordable financing, promoting entrepreneurship, and fostering public-private partnerships to expand job opportunities. These findings provide critical insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and other stakeholders working to address youth unemployment in Malawi's urban contexts.

Keywords: Youth employment, Sustainable livelihoods, Lilongwe City, Skills development, Entrepreneurship, Malawi.

Introduction

Youth unemployment has emerged as one of the most pressing socio-economic issues facing Sub-Saharan Africa, with Malawi being no exception. According to the National Statistical Office (2021), young people aged 15–35 constitute over 60% of Malawi's population, yet they account for the highest proportion of the unemployed. In urban centres such as Lilongwe City, the challenge is magnified by rapid population growth, rural-to-urban migration, and the limited absorptive capacity of the formal labour market.

While the Government of Malawi, through initiatives such as the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS III) and the National Youth Policy, has sought to address youth unemployment, the problem persists due to a complex interplay of structural, economic, and institutional factors. Several studies (Chirwa & Mvula, 2016; Mussa et al., 2020) have noted that inadequate skills training, limited access to capital, and a lack of supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems hinder the transition of young people into sustainable employment. Furthermore, the dominance of informal employment raises concerns about job quality, income stability, and social protection.

In Lilongwe City, the situation reflects broader national trends but is also shaped by urban-specific challenges such as high competition for limited formal jobs, rising living costs, and limited industrial diversification. There is a growing consensus among researchers and practitioners that sustainable youth employment requires integrated interventions addressing both demand- and supply-side constraints. However, empirical evidence on the specific barriers and potential solutions in urban Malawi remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the multifaceted challenges to sustainable youth employment in Lilongwe City, drawing on perspectives from young job seekers, employers, and policymakers. The research further examines the implications of these challenges for socio-economic development and provides targeted recommendations for improving youth labour market outcomes.

Literature Review

The literature identifies interlinked *structural* and *socioeconomic* factors affecting sustainable youth employment in Lilongwe, Malawi. Structurally, challenges include an *education skills mismatch*, where curricula are theoretical and poorly aligned with labor market needs, underfunded TVET

programs, weak labor market governance, fragmented policies, and inadequate infrastructure. Limited economic diversification further restricts job creation, leaving most youth in low-paying informal work.

Socioeconomic barriers such as *poverty, gender disparities, and unequal access to social capital* compound the problem. Poverty limits access to quality education, vocational training, and employment networks. Gender-based constraints early marriage, caregiving roles, and educational gaps reduce women's participation in decent work. Employment often depends on personal networks, excluding marginalized youth.

Youth employment initiatives, including *YEDEF* and *TEVETA*, have shown limited impact due to underfunding, poor targeting, lack of private sector engagement, and minimal youth involvement in program design. The study adopts *Structuralist* and *Human Capital* theories to explain how systemic inefficiencies and skill deficits interact to perpetuate unemployment. Addressing these issues requires integrated reforms in education, policy coordination, infrastructure, gender inclusion, and entrepreneurship support, grounded in participatory and evidence-based approaches.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges to sustainable youth employment in Lilongwe City. The quantitative component involved structured questionnaires administered to young job seekers, while the qualitative component consisted of in-depth interviews with employers, policymakers, and civil society representatives.

The research was conducted in Lilongwe City, the administrative and political capital of Malawi. The city has a diverse economic base, encompassing public administration, commerce, manufacturing, and services. However, employment creation has not matched population growth, leading to heightened youth unemployment and underemployment.

The study population comprised unemployed and underemployed youth aged between 18 and 35 years, along with key stakeholders involved in youth employment initiatives. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 120 youth participants for the survey. Additionally, 15 key informants—including representatives from government ministries, private companies, and NGOs—were interviewed to gain deeper insights.

Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and document review. Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

4.2 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 Age Group

Age Group				
Age Group	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	16	38.1	38.1	38.1
22-25	1	2.4	2.4	40.5
26-30	5	11.9	11.9	52.4
31-35	20	47.6	47.6	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

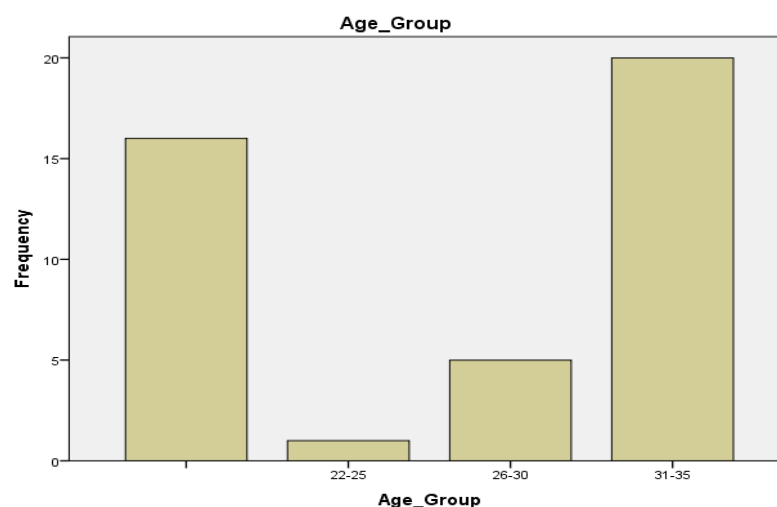


Figure 1 Age Group

Employment challenges among young people remain a pressing issue in many developing countries, and recent data reveals concerning trends regarding the age at which individuals successfully transition into sustainable employment. The analysis of survey data shows that the *majority of respondents (47.6%) were within the 31 to 35-year age bracket*, followed by *38.1% in the 16 to 21-year age group*, and *11.9% in the 26 to 30-year category*. This pattern paints a striking picture: a significant number of individuals are still struggling to secure stable employment well into their early to mid-thirties. It is indicative of a *prolonged and complex transition* from the world of education into gainful and lasting work.

The survey reveals that nearly half of the respondents fall within the 31 to 35-year age group, making them the most represented in the data. This finding alone carries weighty implications. Traditionally, by the early thirties, most individuals would be expected to have completed their education, gained initial work experience, and begun establishing a clear career trajectory. However, the high representation of individuals in this age group still experiencing employment challenges suggests a *delayed integration into the workforce*.

In comparison, the 16 to 21-year age group comprises 38.1% of the respondents. This category generally consists of recent high school graduates, college students, or individuals in vocational training. It is somewhat expected that this group would report challenges related to employment, as they are at the beginning of their career paths. However, the sheer number of youth already in distress at such a young age is equally alarming.

The remaining 11.9% falls within the 26 to 30 age group. This demographic is typically considered to be in the phase of *early career development*, and in healthy economic conditions, most should already be participating actively in the job market. The relatively low representation of this group compared to the 31–35 age bracket may indicate that many individuals either drop out of the job search altogether due to disillusionment or migrate toward informal or underreported employment sectors that were not captured in this study.

The data tells a compelling story about how long it takes for young people to find meaningful employment. In a standard progression, one would expect the 26–30 age bracket to hold the largest percentage of employment seekers or newly employed individuals. But in this case, the *peak shifts to those aged 31–35*, signaling systemic barriers that delay employment.

4.2.2 Gender

Table 2 Gender

Sex

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	17	40.5	65.4	65.4
Female	8	19.0	30.8	96.2
prefer not to say	1	2.4	3.8	100.0
Total	26	61.9	100.0	
System	16	38.1		
Total	42	100.0		

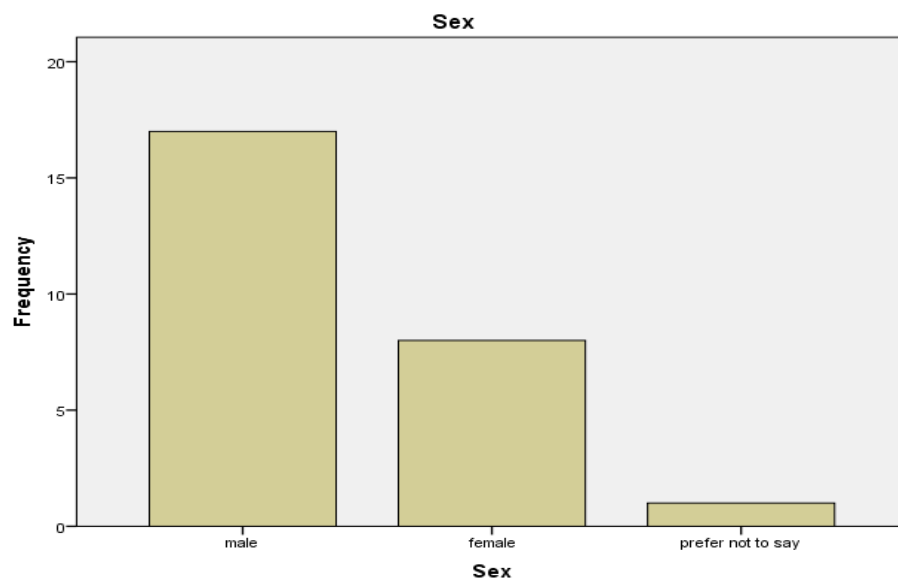


Figure 2 Gender

Gender Disparities in Employment: A Closer Look at Workforce Inclusion and Representation

Gender equality remains one of the most critical challenges in modern employment landscapes, especially in developing countries, where structural, cultural, and socioeconomic factors often converge to limit opportunities for women and gender minorities. A recent survey involving 26 respondents revealed a notable gender disparity: *65.4% of participants identified as male*, while *30.8% identified as female*, and *3.8% chose not to disclose their gender*. While the sample size may seem modest, the implications of this data are far-reaching. It provides a snapshot of gender representation and hints at deeper, systemic issues that influence who gets employed, who gets heard, and who ultimately thrives in the labor market.

This statistical breakdown not only provides a quantitative starting point but also raises questions about *gender-based barriers to employment*, inclusion, and equal opportunity. It reflects the *persistent gender gaps in access to education, employment, resources, and leadership*. The significance of this data is further discussed in Section 4.5 of the report, where specific barriers and experiences among different gender groups are examined in greater detail. However, in this expanded discussion, we delve into the broader social, cultural, and economic context surrounding this data to understand *why these disparities exist*, what they mean, and how they can be addressed through targeted interventions.

At first glance, the figures *65.4% male*, *30.8% female*, and *3.8% undisclosed* may appear as simple percentages, but they speak volumes about the *distribution of opportunity* in employment sectors. A nearly two-thirds male dominance in respondents suggests that *men are either more present in employment-related environments or more comfortable participating in employment-related surveys or initiatives*. Meanwhile, the lower female representation highlights possible exclusions, marginalization, or barriers that prevent women from accessing or engaging with such platforms.

1. *Male respondents (65.4%)*: This high representation could be reflective of a labor market where men are overrepresented, especially in formal or technical sectors. It may also suggest that men are more frequently positioned in roles that offer visibility and involvement in organizational assessments or research participation.
2. *Female respondents (30.8%)*: While not insignificant, this figure is substantially lower than that of their male counterparts, hinting at possible structural disadvantages, including *limited access to education, fewer professional opportunities, or underrepresentation in certain industries*. This could also reflect broader social norms that restrict women's mobility, decision-making power, or career aspirations.
3. *Non-disclosed gender (3.8%)*: Although a small number, it is important to recognize those who may not feel comfortable identifying within traditional binary categories. Their participation acknowledges a growing need for *inclusivity and safety* in data collection, especially for non-binary or gender-diverse individuals.

To understand the current gender imbalance, it is helpful to consider the historical and cultural underpinnings that have shaped gender roles in the workforce. In many countries, *patriarchal structures* have traditionally defined men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. This binary division of labor not only influenced societal expectations but also laid the groundwork for systemic inequality in educational opportunities, employment access, and political representation.

For decades, women's participation in formal employment has been hindered by:

1. *Lack of access to higher education or technical training*, especially in rural areas
2. *Gender-based discrimination* in hiring and promotions
3. *Unpaid care work*, which disproportionately falls on women and limits their availability for formal work
4. *Cultural and religious norms* that discourage or restrict female employment
5. *Sexual harassment and unsafe work environments*, making certain sectors hostile to women

Even when women do gain employment, they are more likely to be found in *lower-paying, insecure, and informal jobs*. They are underrepresented in decision-making roles and overrepresented in fields like domestic work, caregiving, and agriculture, which are often undervalued.

The findings from this survey bring to the surface a number of *gender-specific employment challenges*, many of which align with global trends but are often exacerbated in low-income settings. These include:

The disproportionate number of male respondents may reflect that *men are more likely to have access to job training, internships, and employment opportunities*, especially in sectors such as technology, finance, and construction. Women, on the other hand, may find themselves relegated to roles that offer little room for upward mobility.

Gender stereotypes continue to influence hiring decisions, workplace culture, and career pathways. Fields like engineering, ICT, or leadership positions are often deemed "male domains," while sectors like caregiving or administrative work are feminized. This *horizontal and vertical segregation* confines individuals to gendered roles and limits the diversity of professional options. A major challenge for many women is balancing employment with caregiving duties. Without supportive policies such as maternity leave, affordable childcare, and flexible working hours, many women *opt out of full-time employment* or avoid certain jobs altogether. This often leads to career gaps and slower career progression.

The global gender pay gap remains stubbornly high. Women, on average, earn less than men for the same work, and are less likely to receive bonuses or promotions. The consequences are far-reaching affecting long-term savings, pension accumulation, and overall economic empowerment. Workplace harassment remains a significant barrier for women. Many women report experiencing inappropriate behavior, bullying, or even sexual harassment in professional environments, particularly in male-dominated sectors. The *lack of enforcement of workplace safety laws* makes it difficult for women to speak up or seek justice.

The 3.8% of respondents who chose not to disclose their gender, though a small fraction, highlight a *growing need for gender-inclusive language, policies, and data collection practices*. Gender diversity is still poorly understood in many societies, and gender-nonconforming individuals often face *heightened levels of discrimination*, both in education and employment. Their inclusion in surveys and studies is essential not only for statistical representation but also for fostering environments that are *inclusive, safe, and affirming* of all gender identities.

To address these gender disparities, a *multi-pronged approach is needed*, focusing on policy reform, cultural change, and economic restructuring. Key recommendations include:

Education systems must actively dismantle gender stereotypes by promoting for both boys and girls. Career guidance counselors should encourage young women to explore careers in STEM, finance, politics, and leadership areas where they have traditionally been underrepresented. Governments and organizations must adopt affirmative policies to *promote gender balance* in recruitment, promotions, and leadership. This includes *gender quotas*, transparent hiring practices, and regular gender audits to monitor progress. Micro-finance programs, vocational training, and entrepreneurship incubators targeted at women can boost their economic independence and help close the employment gap. These initiatives should be designed with flexibility to accommodate women's time constraints and should provide childcare support.

Laws must be enforced to protect women and gender-diverse individuals from workplace discrimination, harassment, and violence. Establishing *reporting mechanisms, employee training, and accountability systems* is vital. Employers and policymakers must recognize that gender is not binary. Efforts should be made to create inclusive policies that *accommodate non-binary individuals*, from inclusive bathrooms and dress codes to pronoun recognition and gender-neutral hiring practices.

The data presented 65.4% male, 30.8% female, and 3.8% undisclosed is not just a numerical observation; it is a *diagnostic tool* for identifying inequities and guiding corrective action. Gender-based disparities in employment are not merely “women’s issues” they are *economic, social, and human rights issues* that affect the development and cohesion of entire societies. As we move toward more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable economic models, it is essential to build systems where *gender is no longer a barrier* to employment or professional success. Inclusion must be deliberate, systemic, and proactive. This seemingly simple statistical breakdown of gender among 26 respondents offers a window into deeper social dynamics. The overrepresentation of men and the underrepresentation of women (and gender-diverse individuals) reflect entrenched inequalities that must be urgently addressed.

4.2.3 Educational Attainment

Table 3 Education Level

Educational Level				
Level	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No formal education	16	38.1	38.1	38.1
Tertiary education (college/university)	1	2.4	2.4	40.5
Vocational/Technical training	23	54.8	54.8	95.2
Total	42	100.0	100.0	100.0

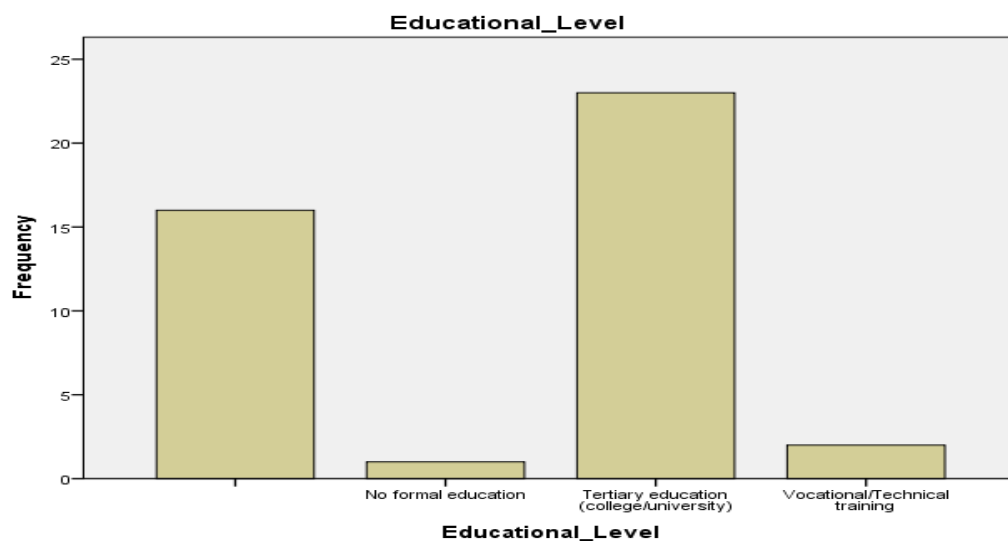


Figure 3 Education Level

A recent survey revealed that the majority of respondents 54.8% had attained tertiary education, which includes qualifications from universities, colleges, or other post-secondary institutions. This statistic reflects a growing trend in educational attainment, indicating that more people are pursuing advanced learning in an effort to improve their career prospects and socio-economic status.

In addition to those with tertiary education, 4.8% of the respondents had received vocational training. Vocational education typically involves practical and technical skills training for specific trades or careers such as plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, automotive mechanics, or other skilled professions. These types of programs are often shorter in duration than a full university degree and are aimed at equipping individuals with the hands-on experience needed to enter the workforce quickly and effectively. Surprisingly, 2.4% of respondents reported having no formal education at all. This small but significant portion of the population likely faces greater barriers to employment and economic advancement due to limited access to formal skills and qualifications.

At first glance, the high percentage of individuals with tertiary education may seem encouraging. It suggests that educational institutions are producing a large number of graduates who, in theory, should be well-positioned to meet the demands of the modern job market. However, despite this impressive level of academic achievement, the country is still grappling with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, especially among young adults and recent graduates. This contradiction points to a deeper, systemic issue: the mismatch between education and employment opportunities. Many people invest years of time, effort, and financial resources into obtaining degrees, only to find that the job market either cannot absorb them or does not value the specific skills they have acquired. As a result, a significant number of degree holders are either unemployed or working in jobs that do not utilize their qualifications a condition known as underemployment.

One contributing factor to this problem is the structure of the labor market itself. In many developing economies, including Malawi, the formal job market is relatively small. Most people end up working in informal sectors—such as small-scale farming, street vending, or casual labor—where academic qualifications may not directly translate into job opportunities. While education can enhance critical thinking, communication skills, and general knowledge, these traits are not always enough to secure formal employment when the overall number of available jobs is limited.

In some sectors, particularly the public service and finance, there are strict entry requirements and limited positions available, making it difficult for even highly educated individuals to secure employment. Furthermore, in private industry, employers may seek experience in addition to qualifications, which creates a catch-22 for young graduates who need a job to gain experience, but can't get hired because they don't already have it.

This situation raises important questions about the relevance and alignment of the current education system with the needs of the labor market. Are the skills being taught in universities and colleges truly aligned with what employers are looking for? Are institutions responsive enough to changes in industry and technology? Unfortunately, the answer often seems to be no. Many educational programs remain theoretical rather than practical, focusing more on rote learning than real-world problem solving. As a result, graduates may leave school with strong academic foundations but lack the hands-on experience and industry-specific competencies that would make them immediately employable. For instance, a student with a degree in business administration may not be familiar with the digital tools now standard in many workplaces, such as customer relationship management (CRM) software, accounting applications, or data analytics platforms. Similarly, someone with a literature degree may struggle to find work unless they supplement their knowledge with skills in writing, communication, media production, or education.

Vocational education could provide a potential solution to this issue, as it focuses on developing specific, job-ready skills. However, the data shows that only 4.8% of respondents had received vocational training, which is relatively low. This may reflect a perception that vocational pathways are less prestigious than university degrees, or it could indicate that there are simply fewer opportunities and institutions offering high-quality technical education. There is a growing recognition that vocational and technical education should be expanded and better integrated into the national education strategy. By offering more young people the option to pursue careers in skilled trades and technical fields, the country could help alleviate the employment crisis while also addressing shortages in critical sectors like construction, agriculture, and healthcare.

The small group of respondents **2.4%** who reported having no formal education represents a particularly vulnerable segment of the population. Individuals in this category may face significant disadvantages in both the job market and society at large. Without literacy, numeracy, or basic technical skills, their employment options are often limited to low-paying, physically demanding jobs. This reinforces cycles of poverty and limits social mobility. It's crucial that policies and programs be designed to support lifelong learning and adult education, ensuring that those who missed out on early education opportunities can still develop skills and participate meaningfully in the workforce.

4.3 Employment Status and Challenges

Table 4 Employment Status

Employment status				
Current Status	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	16	38.1	38.1	38.1
Employed full-time	19	45.2	45.2	83.3
Employed part-time	2	4.8	4.8	88.1
Self-employed	4	9.5	9.5	97.6
Unemployed	1	2.4	2.4	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

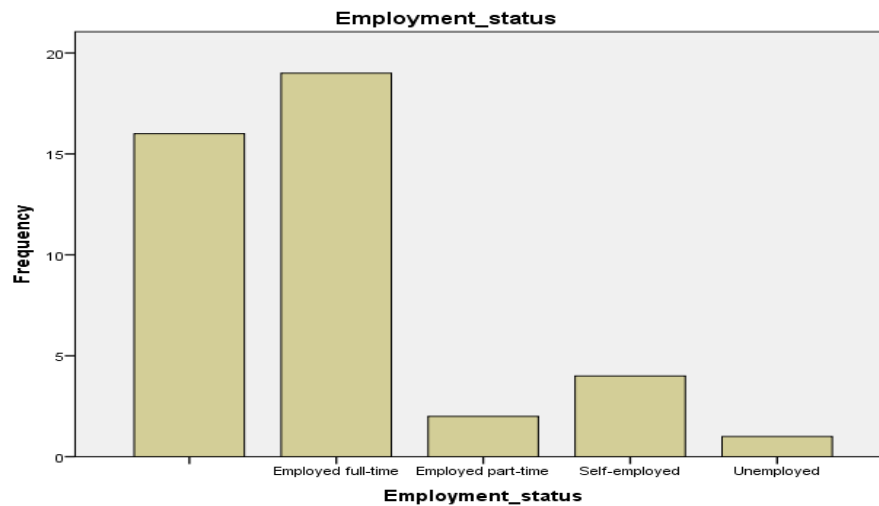


Figure 4 Employment Status

While 45.2% were employed full-time, only 4.8% had part-time jobs, and 9.5% were self-employed. Notably, 2.4% were unemployed, but this figure may underrepresent actual unemployment, as the qualitative data suggests many are underemployed or dissatisfied with precarious work.

Table 5 Barriers to Employment

Barriers_to_employment

Respondants_Comment	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Limited access to quality education and	16	38.1	38.1	38.1
Limited job opportunities in formal sector	11	26.2	26.2	64.3
Poor transport and urban infrastructure;	9	21.4	21.4	85.7
Weak labor market policies	1	2.4	2.4	88.1
Weak labor market policies; Limited job o	1	2.4	2.4	90.5
Weak labor market policies; Limited job o	4	9.5	9.5	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

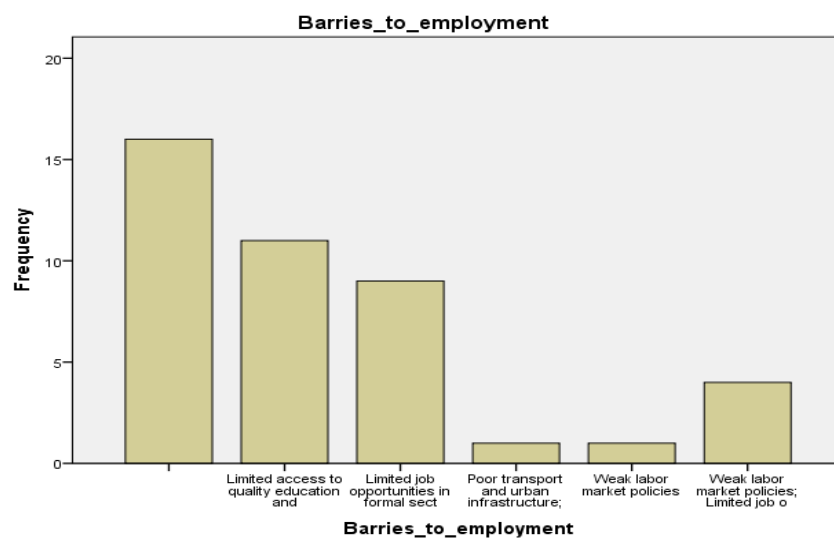


Figure 5 Barriers to Employment

The key barriers cited include:

Across many developing regions, including parts of sub-Saharan Africa, socio-economic progress remains hindered by a complex web of interrelated challenges. A deeper understanding of these challenges reveals four major barriers: limited access to quality education, limited job opportunities in the formal sector, weak labor market policies, and poor infrastructure. According to recent findings, 26.2% of respondents cited *limited access to quality education* as a primary barrier, followed by 21.4% identifying *limited job opportunities in the formal sector*. *Weak labor market policies* and *poor infrastructure* each accounted for 2.4% of the responses. However, the data also shows that many individuals pointed to a *combination* of these factors, emphasizing the intricate interdependencies between them.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that addressing youth unemployment in Lilongwe City requires a multi-pronged strategy. Improving access to affordable finance, aligning education with labour market demands, fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems, and promoting industrial diversification are essential. Enhanced collaboration between public and private sectors will ensure that skills development initiatives translate into sustainable employment opportunities.

6. Recommendations

1. Expand vocational and technical training programs tailored to market needs.
2. Establish youth-targeted financing schemes with minimal collateral requirements.
3. Strengthen public–private partnerships to stimulate job creation.
4. Enhance entrepreneurial support services, including mentorship and incubation.
5. Promote industrial diversification to broaden employment opportunities.

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