

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **School dropout and early marriage affects youth agribusiness employment**

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**This article focused on uncovering the background of the youth lamenting unemployment in the presence of agribusiness employment opportunities. A phenomenological qualitative design was employed to generate in-depth information. The sample frame was formed of youth agribusiness clubs from the district agribusiness office. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants doing different agribusinesses. Photovoice, focus group discussions, and oral interviews were used to generate data, which was analyzed using content, discourse, and thematic approaches. The data revealed that background factors such as age, educational attainment, and marital status were key factors in explaining youth unemployment in agribusiness employment opportunities. The study found that most youths in rural areas marry soon after dropping out of school, followed by taking up agriculture as a livelihood. Those youth dropping out of school before they turn 18 are considered children and enter agribusiness without the necessary skills. Systematically, they are forced to engage in agribusiness at a very young age, such as 14, in order to survive and to take on family responsibilities. The study recommended the introduction of practical agriculture in primary and secondary schools so that school dropouts at least gain agribusiness skills for self-employment, as well as deploying new ways of reducing early marriages.**

**Key words:** School dropout, youth unemployment, phenomenological qualitative approach, agribusiness, child abuse.

## **INTRODUCTION**

School dropout is one of the challenges locking the education sector in Malawi, with most of the school dropouts falling below the age of eighteen and into the childhood group. In order to earn a living, the youth who have dropped out of school often enter into early marriages and engage in a variety of self-employment

agribusiness enterprises, such as poultry, vegetables (onions, tomatoes, and potatoes), sheep and goat fattening, cereal production, and dairy production (Tarekegn et al., 2022). These enterprises are selected due to their perceived profitability. Malawi has a youthful population and an unemployment rate of 18.5% (National

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Statistical Office, 2018). Agriculture is a major contribution to Malawi's economy, accounting for 39% of its GDP, employing 85% of its workforce in the food and cash crop industries, and generating more than 90% of its foreign exchange earnings. In a study conducted in Karonga, Salima, Kasungu, Lilongwe, Mangochi, Zomba, Chikwawa, Mzuzu and Mwanza, 83.2% of the youths were of the view that agriculture remains the main employer directly in production and agribusiness (Zidana et al., 2020).

Rigg et al. (2018) state that motivation is one of the key factors that explain youth engagement in agribusiness, but that young farmers are hesitant to work on farms due to seeing little opportunity for increasing income. Kafle (2019) and Zidana et al. (2020) both argue that agriculture is a laborious yet low-paying and high-risk enterprise, creating disincentives for youths to engage in it due to low profit margins and limited agricultural insurance.

Low public perception about the sector and parental influence to move out of farming, as well as low profitability, have been highlighted as demotivating factors for the youth by Susilowati (2014).

On-farm and non-farm activities have been closely related to youth engaged in agribusiness, with more rural people engaging in different non-farm activities, such as small scale business, on-farm labour and off-farm wage labour, in order to diversify their livelihoods (Mangulama and Shengkun, 2016). Due to the decline in incomes through agribusiness, on average 44% of rural African households are engaging in non-farm wage employment or self-employment (Ackah, 2013).

Youth can be motivated to participate in agribusiness in Malawi if the following challenges are addressed: provision of agribusiness management training; availability of agriculture extension services; improved access to land; increased access to capital; provision of agricultural infrastructure; value addition; and a shift in the positive perception towards agriculture and agribusiness (Zidana et al. 2020). These challenges, when resolved, can help to reduce unemployment.

Since youth unemployment was recognized to be an issue of concern worldwide attention began to grow in form of stimulating debate and actions. The, United Nations General Assembly (2015) highlight issues of youth unemployment under Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals. At continental level, African Union (2011) highlights youth unemployment in the *„African Youth Decade 2009-2018 plan for action: Accelerating Youth Empowerment for sustainable development*. At national level, Malawi discusses youth unemployment in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, Malawi Government (2017) but also in the National Youth Policy, Malawi Government (2016) among other documents. Youth unemployment discourses and policy formulation at different levels suggest the importance of the subject matter. There has also been a growing attention on

projects addressing youth unemployment. One of such projects is the „Jobs for Youth.“

Agribusiness is believed to be one of the viable solutions to the youth unemployment paradox in Africa, and particularly in Malawi, as it is highly featured in rural development, economic empowerment, and job creation. Okali and Sumberg (2012) predicted that most African youth in Sub Sahara region would pursue agricultural livelihoods.

The United Nations (2012) and the Economic Commission for Africa (2009) recognize youths as people aged between 15 to 24. The African Union (2011) adopts an African Union definition which recognizes youths as those aged from 15 to 35 years. Brempong and Kimenji (2013) also reveal that Ghana, Tanzania, and the Republic of South Africa recognize the age 15 to 35 brackets as youth. The definition of youth in Malawi's National Youth Policy (2013) defines youth as “all persons from age 10 to 35 years regardless of their age, sex, race, education, culture religion, economic, marital and physical status” (7). However, this poses potential conflict with the country's Labour Laws, which recognise children as those under the age of sixteen in accordance with Section 23 Subsection 5 of the Malawi Constitution (2006). The definition of youth in Malawi has implications on the overall percentage of youth in the country, as well as the legal age to participate in agribusiness and employment, since the labour laws prohibit engagement in agricultural activities by those under sixteen. This means that, although the national definition of youth encompasses those aged between 10 and 35, the age range appropriate for agribusiness and employment is 17 to 35. As a result, the majority of the population in Malawi is considered to be of youth age. According to the 2018 census conducted by the National Statistical Office, the population of Malawi stood at 17,563,749, with approximately 50% of the population being youths aged 10-35 and 36% being legally eligible to engage in agribusiness between the ages of 17-35. This technical variation in defining youth can have important implications for dealing with youth-related issues in agriculture and youth employment, as well as discussions involving the youth in other sectors.

In terms of marital status of the youth, Malawi Government (2010), under the Childcare, protection and justice Act No.22 of 2010 recognized children as those under the age of sixteen. Odhiambo (2016) noted that in 2015, Malawi amended its marriage law to have a minimum marriage age of 18, but the constitution allows children between the ages of 15 and 18 to marry with parental consent, and is unclear on those under 15.

In terms of education background, Sabola (2023) highlights that World Bank human capital review report indicate that less than 40 percent of primary school pupils transition to secondary schools. This suggests that some of the school dropouts could be those in agribusiness.

Any form of employment requires certain skills,

knowledge, values and attitude for one to perform. The background of the youth in specific communities and how it affects their employability in agribusiness is a subject of interest in this article.

### Problem statement

The government, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders are continuously putting effort into promoting school completion and discouraging early marriages as a way of combating the deeply rooted tradition of school dropout followed by early marriage and engagement in agribusiness. Despite the agribusiness employment opportunities, the National Statistical Office (2018) reported that youth unemployment was still high. This situation presented a pragmatic gap in understanding why the youth continued to suffer unemployment even though agribusiness employment opportunities were available. Literature is scant on the backgrounds of the unemployed youth and how such backgrounds relate to unemployment.

### Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to generate data that would help understand the determinants of youth unemployment in agribusiness employment opportunity situation. Such an understanding would be crucial in crafting solutions such as policies and interventions towards creating agribusiness youth employment and thereby reducing youth unemployment.

### Theoretical framework

The study adopted Victor Vroom's expectancy theory of motivation to help understand youth unemployment in agribusiness employment opportunity nation. Youth unemployment was being studied under the lenses of the theory which includes expectancy, instrumentality and valence. These lenses further helped in digging out information related what might have contributed to motivation and demotivation the youth to engage in agribusiness. This theory was supported by the concept of value chain. This concept helped in analyzing the entire agribusiness value chain to understand the issue of youth unemployment.

### Research question

The main study was guided by the question: "what were the determinants of youth unemployment in agribusiness employment opportunities in northern Malawi? Specifically, for this article, the guiding question was

"what was the background of the youth determining unemployment in agribusiness employment opportunities in northern Malawi?"

### METHODOLOGY

The study used a phenomenological qualitative design. According to Ndengu (2012), the design helps to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it. Interpretivist and critical theories as paradigms further guided the study.

The study was carried out in northern districts on Malawi which included; Mzimba, Nkhatabay, Likoma, Chitipa, Rumphi and Karonga. Agribusiness youth groups were sampled from district agricultural offices database registered as active groups. Furthermore, groups were purposively sampled from the database based on the different types of agribusiness and location in the geographical district. This was to ensure rich data were generated from different parts of the district. Secondly, snowball sampling was used in one to one oral interviews. Ndengu (2012) and Mertens (2005) agree on purposive sampling for qualitative studies.

This study used participatory methods of; photovoice, interviews, and focus group discussions. This approach has also been supported by Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) who indicate that „we call employment of a multiple tools triangulation“. Table 1 shows the discussion of findings and the number of participants by sex and data generation method.

Verbal data gathered through oral interviews and focus group discussions was analysed using narrative and discourse techniques. Textual data gathered through photovoices and transcriptions of interviews was analysed using content analysis. This analysis led to further abstraction and grouping of related data and themes developed. This article has zeroed in on theme one, background of the youth having an influence on their engagement in agriculture and agribusiness. The next table presents themes related to this article developed in the study.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Sex of participants in agribusiness employment

On sex, the majority of youth farmers were males. An in-depth enquiry revealed several factors responsible for the trend. The first one was connected to land ownership issues. The study was carried out in patrilineal setup where men traditionally own land. As such, men become decision makers in agribusiness (Table 2).

Focus group discussions revealed that an unmarried male youth person may be allocated a piece of land for farming while a female one may not. The female youth is expected to join unknown man in marriage where she would get settled. One participant in AYF OI 15 said that "mwana kaziwali jecho; *palawandatengwecharontchawapapi* wake, *palawatengwacharontchamfumu wake*" translated as "A woman does not have land; when unmarried, the land belongs to parents and when married, the land belongs to the husband." This depicts women as proxy to land ownership as they are culturally not deemed to own land, but simply users. As a user without ownership rights,

**Table 1.** Thematic analysis showing codes, categories and themes.

| Code                                    | Category                        | Theme  |
|---|---------------------------------|--|
| Age                                     |                                 |  |
| Sex                                     |                                 |  |
| Family size                             | Characteristics of participants | Background of participants                               |
| Marital status                          |                                 |  |
| Educational level                       |                                 |  |
| Maize, rice                             |                                 |  |
| Soya beans, Unyunya, ground nuts, beans | Forms of agribusiness           | Common agribusiness enterprises by geographical location |
| Tomato, onions, Irish potato, cabbage   |                                 |  |
| Cotton                                  |                                 |  |
| Goats, pigs                             |                                 |  |
| Beekeeping                              |                                 |  |

Source Author.

**Table 2.** Sex of participants in agribusiness employment.

| Sex    | Photovoice | FGD | Oral interviews | Number of participants | Percentage |
|--------|------------|-----|-----------------|------------------------|------------|
| Male   | 17         | 76  | 14              | 107                    | 50.2       |
| Female | 7          | 89  | 10              | 106                    | 49.8       |
| Total  | 24         | 165 | 24              | 213                    | 100.0      |

Source: Author.

most women face challenges in accessing land for own agribusiness enterprises.

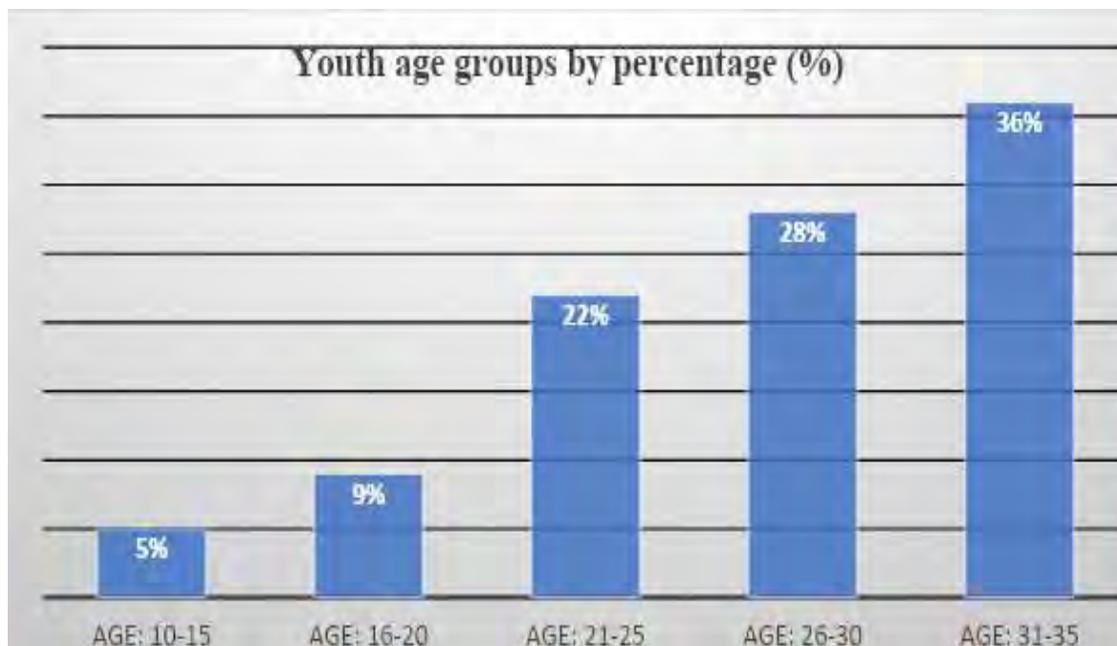
The second issue discussed was the stability of female members who, upon getting married, may find themselves in a different village, where the man has authority over the land, due to the patrilineal system of marriage practised in all the districts. The issue of land ownership between males and females has sparked debate in recent years, and the Malawi Government (2016) acknowledges this challenge and has promised that its national policy will promote access to ownership and control of productive resources, such as land, water, and farm inputs, as well as access to finance for females working under male leadership. It is not clear to what extent the policy has promoted land ownership, particularly for female victims of cultural discrimination when it comes to ownership rights. This study noted that land issues remain a challenge, particularly for rural women in agribusiness. By providing land certificates to both males and females, this challenge contributes to low female participation in agribusiness, particularly ownership of the enterprises, and helps to promote gender sensitive land management in rural areas.

In contrast, women did not have the same access to capital, as men had better control over existing capital resources. Therefore, women were unable to use these resources to start businesses and put themselves

forward economically. Participant AYF OI 16 expressed her desire to grow more tomatoes, but lacked the necessary fertilizer, and was unable to engage in typical male activities such as bicycle taxi, as this was seen as socially unacceptable for a woman to do. This suggests that gender issues still persist in rural areas, holding back some women from engaging in certain economic activities. This finding is consistent with Zidana et al. (2020) study, which assessed the engagement of youth in agribusiness in Malawi, and their perceptions and impediments.

**Age of youth in agribusiness employment in the study**

The succeeding bar graph presents age of youth in agribusiness employment engaged in the study. As shown in chapter in the preceding Figure 1, the majority of youth participants fell in the age group of 31 to 35. This suggests that older members were more engaged in agribusiness than lower ages within the youth category. Initially this study considered the age of 18 to 35 as research participants with the view that even though the national youth policy recognizes the youth as those between 10 to 35, the constitution which is the supreme law categorises all people under the age 16 as children.



**Figure 1.** Age of the youth in agribusiness employment.  
Source: Author.

In-depth studies revealed that some members who were aged 16 and engaged in agribusiness were also married. These findings were in agreement with Gausi (2020) who reported that by the age 18, 42% of the girls were already in marriage and 29% of the girls aged between 15 and 19 had begun child bearing. Even though ages 16 and below were not supposed to be part of participants, the study took a special interest to learn more on why the youth below age 16 were engaged in agribusiness clubs.

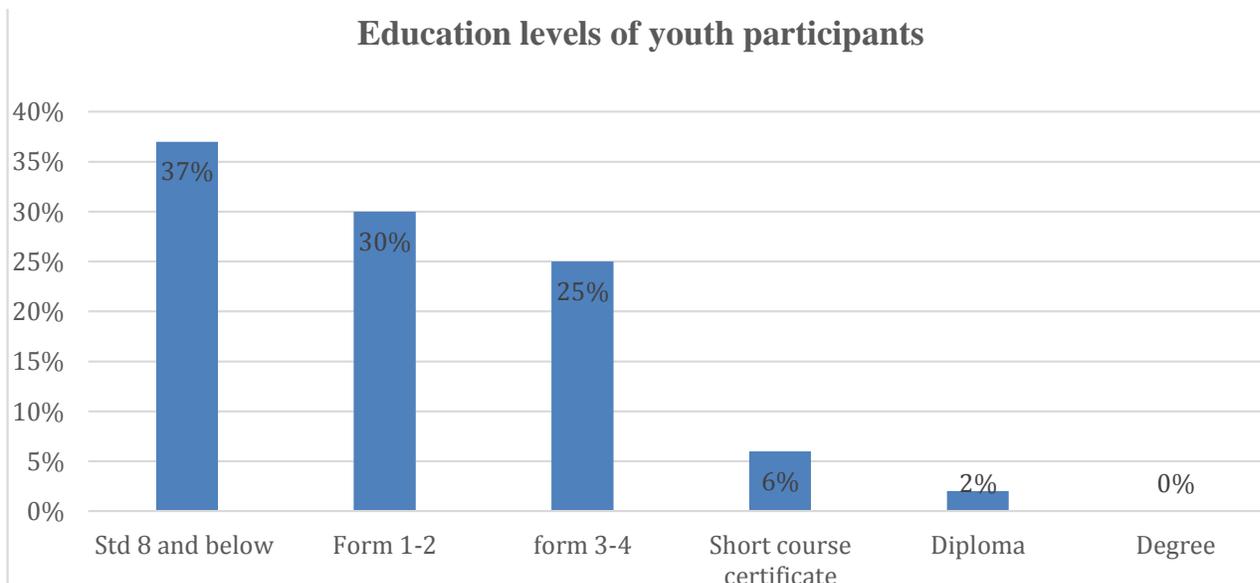
Some agribusiness youth clubs with members below 16 years include AYF FGD 5 and AYF FGD 9. The following were the reasons for including children under 16 in the farmer clubs;

1. Children are trained to take up adult roles in farming.
2. Some children have no hope in making a living through white collar jobs as they do not perform well in class.
3. Those who were married had to start to be economically independent. Agribusiness was the most available option.

One member in AYF FGD 9 argued that one of the reasons most youths do not like farming was because it was introduced at a later stage in their lives. One member said that in their club, children below age 16 were taken as „farmers on nurse.“ On whether this disturbs education, it was discussed that all children were being encouraged to attend schools. Children were joining other group members to learn different types of farming after classes. The idea of „farmer nursery“ was also agreed by an agriculture officer (AO 1) who noted

that most youth shun away farming because primary and secondary curriculum does not include practical agriculture and technical and vocational skills as it was the case with curriculum during the first Malawi president, Kamuzu Banda era. AO 1 added that democracy and human rights have been misunderstood to the point that teaching a child future role like agriculture which is the backbone of the economy has recently been coined as child labours. According to this officer, there were more and more youths who grew up with negative attitude about agribusiness because their parents fear to use them. Parents' fear of being in conflict with child labour issues and at the same time the school does not teach it practically, hence creating a pool of youth with no interest in agriculture. Due to limited formal employment opportunities, many youths become unemployed. While engaging children in agriculture is mostly considered as child labour in light of legislation, Chihana (2020) report of some other authorities calling for children to be taught at an early stage in planting trees to protect the environment and retain soil fertility for agriculture. This report agrees with the philosophy of AYF FGD 5 and AYF FGD 9.

In an AYF FGD 5 observation, it was noted that some children who do not expect to earn a living through academics were lagging behind in their educational pursuits, falling short of the expected academic level for their respective ages of 13, 14 and 15. Contrary to this, the members of this group, aged 14 and 15, were in standard 4 and 5 as shown in appendix. This was a sign that they were likely to become dropouts soon. To ensure



**Figure 2.** Summary of education levels for youth participants. Source: Author.

that they had a future, senior members of the group felt it was important to orient them toward a more likely way of life. Findings from other groups agree with these sentiments indirectly. For instance, AYF-PV 13 indicated that he started keeping local chickens when he was in Form One and continued to do so after he completed secondary education, scaling up his efforts.

**Education level of youth in agribusiness in the study**

The next bar graph presents education levels of youths engaged in this study. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of participants were in the group of education levels of up to primary standard 8 and below. The next majority was the category of those who went to as far as junior secondary education (Forms 1 and 2).

Third group was that whose education levels were in senior secondary education (Form 3 and 4). Out of those who attained secondary education, few had actual qualifications such JCE and MSCE. Six percent of the participants had post-secondary education of certificate level while two percent had diplomas. Some post-secondary qualifications for participants engaged in agribusiness self-employment included agribusiness, general agriculture, TEVET and community development.

The researcher agreed with the participants' proposal that it would be unfair to categorise someone holding a PSLCE certificate when they had completed the four years of secondary training but failed one subject to fulfil the requirements of an MSCE certificate. Since the JCE has been phased out, such people would otherwise be

categorised in the group of PSLCE holders, even though their level of knowledge and understanding of educational matters may be far higher.

While other participants displayed good knowledge of operations in agribusiness especially those who had certificates in agriculture and some who attained senior secondary education, others were expressing lack of correct knowledge. For instance, in AYF FGD 3, one participant said *“masuzgohanayaketukoloratuchoko, wafwitiwanandichomenewoyawirampunga, inenalimilekisupalanatolamathinighadono”* translated as *“some other challenges, we harvest little because there is a lot of witchcraft that transfers rice from our field. For example, I cultivated a large piece of land but harvested few tins of rice.”* The other member agreed with him and could not appreciate that recycled seeds could be contributing to low yield. This suggested that they believe witchcraft affects their yield to be low unlike the recycling of seeds and other factors which are scientifically proven as noted by Tscherig (2002) that farmers growing improved and modern varieties had higher yields and earned higher profits than farmers growing traditional varieties. Such beliefs possibly explain the importance of education levels. The two participants had attained school up to primary education. A study by Xhaba and Masuku (2013) in Swaziland used a linear regression to identify determinants of profitability of vegetables and concluded that education levels had a positive relationship with profitability and was significant at 1% level. Another study by Nankhumwa and Peiris (2009) also noted that formal education attained by the farmers affects yield and profitability. In agreeing with these studies, this study submits that some of the challenges

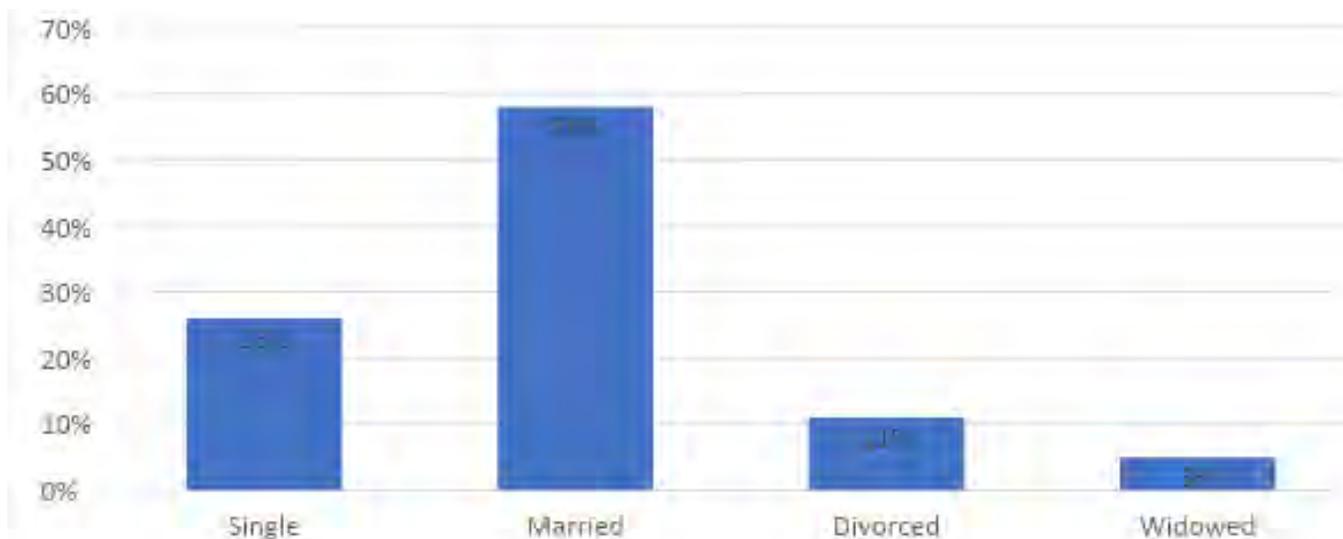


Figure 3. Summary of marital status for the youth in the study.  
Source: Author

that agribusiness youth farmers face could be attributed to low education levels.

In general, the study found out that most youths engaged in agribusiness were those without formal education qualifications and those with low education levels. Such youth were basically school dropouts. Education levels are said to have an effect on agribusiness as noted by different studies cited in this research but also as found in this study.

### Marital status of the youth in agribusiness in the study

The next bar graph presents marital status of the youth in agribusiness engaged in this study. As presented in Figure 3, most participants were married, seconded by single, the widowed and then the divorced. The study revealed that those who get married engage in agribusiness as an extension to subsistence farming. It was discussed that once married, one had to find means of finding food and money for daily subsistence needs such as soap and salt. According to the participants, farming becomes the first option to many in finding food but also agribusiness for income generation. It was reported that those who were single but at the same age as those married were not much worried as they could depend on their parents for survival. It was for this reason that those who get married top the list of youth engaged in agribusiness.

It was interesting in Mzimba when some female participants had indicated single as their marital status when they were actually married and leaving at the patrimonial home. According to such participants, they

opted to be single because they do not receive any support from their husbands who went to the Republic of South Africa over a decade ago. One participant indicated that;

*'Afumu wane wakanitolaaponkhawanavilimika 16. Pakatipajumphachakachimoza, iwowakalutaku South Africa. Mu vilimikavakwambiliravitatu, wakizangamoza pa chakakwizakationandipowakatumangakosondalamayafet eleza, mchere, sopo, Malaya navakukhumbikwavinyake. Kufuma pa vyakavitatuapombwewakalekakutumakalikose. Pa sonovilimika 10 vakwana no wowwiri no kwizako. Pakwambawakatiwizamunitolakutitikakhalengetoseku Joni uko. kenakokwitiwakaziiiiii. Mahumihumiwakutiwatikwaliwalikutolakuko. Nkhujiyimira pa nekhakulimanatuma business. Nkhukhalakunokunthengwapakutipalimwana. Kanaumomwapulikiraapamungatinili pa nthengwa?'*  
translated as;

„My husband married me when I was 16. One year later when I was expectant, my husband went to South Africa. During the first three years, he used to visit home once every year and used to send money for fertilizer, salt, soap, clothes and other needs. Soon after the three years he stopped visiting and supporting me. It is now almost a decade. At first, he promised to come and pick me to South Africa to stay with him there. After sometime, he became quite on this issue.

Romours have it that he married there. I am independent in farming and some small businesses. I stay here (patrimonial home) because I have his child. In

this circumstance, would you consider me as married?"

This question raised debate and the group agreed that she was really single as marriage description needed to be applied where the man supports the woman financially. This discussion was interesting in this study, reflecting at the support husbands render to their wives and the status of being single or married. The remarks concerning migrating to South Africa were in agreement with Niboye (2018:9) who reveal that „Mzimba district in the Republic of Malawi is one of the persistent senders of labour migrants to the Republic of South Africa.“

## Conclusion

In summary, the main study on which this article was based sought to uncover the determinants of youth unemployment in the presence of agribusiness employment opportunities. Specifically, the study aimed to uncover the backgrounds of the youth who lament being unemployed when presented with agribusiness employment opportunities. The study adopted a phenomenological approach in order to gain in-depth insights from those affected, the youth. Thematic, content, and discourse analyses were employed in the data analysis. The findings and discussions imply that the backgrounds of many youths, such as having low education levels, low skill levels, and being married, contributed to unemployment. The study recommends a review of the approaches used in curbing school dropouts and early marriages, which are crucial for agribusiness employment.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study drew the following recommendations;

1. The government need to revise approaches being used in curbing school dropouts and retaining those who dropout.
2. The government and other stakeholders need to review the practice of marriages below the age of 18. Even though the marriage, divorce and family relations Act (Malawi Government, 2017) is in place, there is need to find mechanisms of enforcing it.
3. The engagement of children into agribusiness needs supervision so that it does not turn into child labor.
4. The government needs to review to curriculum by incorporating practical agriculture which is the economic back bone of the rural youth.
5. Maintain Junior Certificate Examinations as it serves a security valve when one is unsuccessful on Malawi School Certificate of Education. This is because the qualification is still important in terms of securing some formal employment but also act as an entry qualification for some skills training.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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