

# LABOR TRAFFICKING IN MALAWI



The Center on Human Trafficking Research & Outreach (CenHTRO) at the University of Georgia in partnership with the Center for Social Research (CSR) at the University of Malawi conducted mixed-methods research\* in 2023–24 to estimate domestic and cross-border labor trafficking (LT) prevalence among youth and young adults aged 18 to 37 (YYAs) and the prevalence of YYAs at risk of LT. The study focused on two districts in Malawi — **Blantyre and Mangochi**.

CenHTRO will use these research findings to create a financial capability intervention for youth and young adults who are labor trafficking survivors or at risk for labor trafficking. Through an interactive workshop model, survivors and at-risk youth and young adults will co-create the intervention with the CenHTRO team. Stakeholders including financial institutions, social service agencies, and government officials will also share their perspectives on the intervention design. This approach ensures a culturally relevant program tailored to participants' needs.

The intervention will link participants to financial guidance, digital savings groups, and economic opportunities such as jobs, skills training, and entrepreneurship training. CenHTRO expects the intervention to increase participants' financial capability, economic resilience, and awareness of safer labor opportunities. In achieving these outcomes, participants' vulnerability to labor trafficking will be reduced. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) will rigorously assess the impact of this work.



# BLANTYRE

## CROSS-BORDER



LT VICTIM



LT RISK

## DOMESTIC



LT VICTIM



LT RISK

# MANGOCHI

## CROSS-BORDER



LT VICTIM



LT RISK

## DOMESTIC



LT VICTIM



LT RISK

*\*Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). Quantitative data was collected via 1,130 household surveys and 1,099 Link Tracing Sampling surveys.*

# KEY FINDINGS



**YYAs reported labor trafficking situations in Malawi primarily in elementary occupations (including agriculture), manufacturing, household work, and service industry**

YYAs reported exploitive experiences in household work (21% in Blantyre and 3% in Mangochi), elementary occupations (which could include elementary work in agriculture, forestry and fishery; 42% in Blantyre and 64% in Mangochi), plant and machine operators and assemblers (32% in Blantyre and 0 in Mangochi), services and sales work (8% in Blantyre and 23% in Mangochi), and craft and related trades work (6% in Blantyre and 8% in Mangochi).



**South Africa and Mozambique were the most reported destination countries where YYAs experienced cross-border labor trafficking**

Blantyre YYAs reported that 90% of cross-border exploitation experiences occurred in RSA and 7% occurred in Mozambique. Among Mangochi YYAs, 70% of reported exploitation experiences occurred in RSA and 29% occurred in Mozambique.

*“...I found a new job in a shop. I also had a problem with this job because it’s a container made of iron sheets which is connected to electricity, and I was sleeping inside the shop. I was sleeping behind the refrigerator which was so close to an electrical switch and imagine you are locked inside; the keys are with your boss, so it was a huge threat on my life...So I had two concerns, ‘what if the shop caught on fire’ which means I will die on the spot. The second thing that bothered me was the thieves, the owners were not staying in the shops because they were afraid of the thieves but because we are foreigners, they [shop owners] don’t care and they now if you get killed by thieves, they will replace you with someone.”*

**Young Man, Mangochi Respondent #15, Experienced LT in RSA**



**Over 60% of YYA survivors surveyed reported experiencing abuses and fraud during the recruitment phase and over half reported degrading work conditions**

Many respondents described experiencing situations where food was withheld, documents (such as passports) were taken away, employers promising to pay wages owed but never following through or experiencing sexual harassment or abuse as a tool for controlling survivors. For example, while working at a maize mill in Mozambique, a YYA respondent described experiencing coercion to keep working with the promise that the wages they were owed would be paid later on, only to be then experience sexual harassment.

*“...he gave me MK 25,000 for 2 months later he started giving me MK 15000 and I said what about the deficit, he said keep on adding the accumulation will give you at once, then I said, oh, okay, I stayed and stayed, then I said my money, he said will give to you later unless you want to become my girlfriend and I said I don't want to be your girlfriend...”*

**Young Woman, Mangochi Respondent #9, Mangochi,  
Experienced LT in Mozambique**



**Economic hardship and lack of opportunity were the primary drivers for vulnerability to experiencing labor trafficking among YYAs**

Qualitative reports describe how the intersecting circumstances of economic hardship, community level resource deprivation and family pressure to financially provide led to migration being seen as one of the only viable options for meeting economic and resource needs, which often resulted in exploitative situations for YYAs in this study.

*“...in short we can just say the problem is poverty because of how I explained earlier that young people do not have access to business, we do not have skill development school where we can learn skills that can empower us economically.”*

**Young Man, Blantyre Respondent #10, Experienced LT in RSA**



**YYA survivors tended to be less able to save and borrow money compared to YYAs who did not experience trafficking, suggesting an increase in the economic stress and demand associated with trafficking for exploitation**

In Malawi, low occurrence of financial transactions among YYAs were identified in both districts, with Mangochi even lower than Blantyre. *Over a half of YYAs in Mangochi and one third of YYAs in Blantyre did not make financial transactions at all in the last 12 months.*

Young people described situations where a family member had to obtain a loan to pay for expenses, such as related to a family crisis, and then were unable to pay the loan back resulting in someone in the household having to get involved in a potentially exploitative situation such as debt-labor.

*“...[my brother] had a problem, his child was sick and was referred to the main hospital, so there was a problem in transportation and money to use for care while there, so he went to obtain a loan there...so when [my nephew] was discharged...[my brother] was having difficulties to pay back the money, so the end result was that he was told [by the loan provider] to go and cultivate farm land until [the loan provider felt] the work done is equivalent to the money.”*

**Young Man, Blantyre Rural Respondent #11, Experienced LT in RSA**



**YYAs reported negative experiences with accessing loans, facing numerous challenges and hurdles including economic, social barriers and feeling let down by lenders**

Survey results indicated that YYAs most often saved money using telecommunication companies and were less likely to save using informal savings groups/clubs, banks or formal financial institutions. However, when they needed to borrow money, they were more likely to turn to family, relatives, friends, or informal savings groups rather than the telecommunication companies. Formal financial institutions were rarely used by YYAs, suggesting a significant gap in the accessibility to formal financial institutions for YYAs.

YYAs who were interviewed described frustrating experiences with trying to access loans through formal banking institutions. Several YYAs described feeling like they were being lied to or used by lenders, especially lenders coming from outside of the community.

*“We have been lied to, they would come and say we want to take your names, after submitting it takes a year without any update...It seems they have been deceiving us, in doing so we can say there is no access to credits... They just come with false promises...the issue of access to loans is a tale because even when we try to apply they just say we will give it to you but we have never received...”*

#### **Young Woman, Mangochi Focus Group #2**



Survivors report feeling alone without support or resources to exit trafficking situations or to have a sustainable future, providers report lack of resources to help survivors

Many YYA and community member focus group respondents described a lack of support or resources available for young people who experience labor trafficking.

*“There was no help, the only help was that person [stranger] who provided transport...he just saw me and asked [where are you from]...I couldn't hide anymore...I thought to myself that I am ready for anything either this person is to help or harm me...I know as of today I would have still [been] in that slavery, [without] that person...I observed that it is not a concern for them [community].”*

#### **Young Woman, Mangochi Respondent #13, Experienced LT in Malawi**

Also, some key informant respondents shared that there are considerable financial and structural gaps in services, which could impede the ability of service providers to intervene and offer support for survivors.

*“Respondent:...there was one young man...selling snacks...[he told me that he] was promised another amount as payment but [had] been underpaid. The first month they did not pay him so I think that he was stuck and he did not have transport to go home. Later on he called, we had given him a phone number to call the investigations department...they [investigations department] told him that he should observe the situation if it doesn't change then...what he should do is call [back] so that we should have enough evidence...”*



*Interviewer: Was he assisted?*

*Respondent: It happened at a time when things started going bad at our office, we are lacking funding so we just put the issues at bay but I think we can follow it up now, I hope it is not too late."*

**Direct Service Provider, Key Informant, Blantyre Respondent #1**



**Respondents recommended that more be done to develop an “enabling environment” for YYAs to thrive and reduce vulnerability to labor trafficking**

An “enabling environment” was described as linking financial knowledge, skills training and entrepreneurship training with real job and business opportunities to ensure that young people have the basic resources needed for living their lives and for reducing vulnerability to labor trafficking. In essence, respondents described wanting to promote inclusion of YYAs in development projects, economic initiatives and community decision making.

*“If [YYAs] are included in [skill and business] opportunities that means this area will benefit in development... When I say ‘development’, I mean you having a good place, having a good house, having a good family, and when I say ‘well’ I mean you are able to find [resources to meet] all the basic need[s] without problems, like food, and to talk about education, you cannot lack school fees if you have a child.”*

**Young Man, Blantyre Rural Respondent #10, Experienced Exploitative Labor in RSA**

This research was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (PEMS 6 SSJIP22CA0029).  
The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State.

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