

# **Male and Female Conceptualizations of Sexual Harassment in Tanzania: The role of consent, male power and social norms**

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## **Abstract**

Sexual harassment is pervasive worldwide, yet there is a lack of clarity on its conceptualization in many settings, especially in low-income countries. Context-specific conceptualization of sexual harassment is vital to develop effective measurement tools, estimate its magnitude and for the design of interventions to address it. We explored how different population groups in Mwanza, Tanzania understood, conceptualized and experienced sexual harassment. This study employed a qualitative research design involving 74 in-depth interviews and 13 focus group discussions with participants from educational, workplace and public settings in Mwanza, Tanzania. Participants were adolescent girls and boys, adult women and men. We explored individual level perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment, and community norms and expectations around sexual harassment. We analysed the data using a thematic approach. Participants' perceptions of sexual harassment emphasized the critical role of consent, the expression of male power and social norms with regards to sexual harassment. Sexual harassment was understood to be a result of men being in positions of power and in charge of material resources, school grades or employment opportunities. These in turn enabled them to take advantage of girls and women. Social norms around male and female interactions, courtship and seduction, expressions of sexual interest were crucial in delineating what was and what was not considered sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a fluid concept, and its definition is highly dependent on contextual factors. Consent underpins the conceptualization of sexual harassment and is a fundamental feature in the definition and measurement of sexual harassment in Tanzania. Consent is largely determined by sexual norms around male and female interactions and gendered power. There is a need for consensus in schools, workplaces and communities about what constitutes sexual harassment in order to measure and address it appropriately.

**Key Words:** Sexual harassment, conceptualization, Tanzania, Schools, public places,  
workplaces

## Introduction

The ground-breaking anti-sexual assault and sexual harassment movements, *Time's Up* and *#MeToo* elevated global awareness of the offending actions that women encounter in their daily personal and working lives (Regulska, 2018). Their ambitious aims are crucial for meeting the world's sustainable development goals (SDGs) of gender equality (SDG5), health and well-being (SDG3), and reducing inequalities (SDG10) (United Nations, 2019). Yet, discussions around *#MeToo* and *Time's Up* have taken place primarily in high income countries with less attention on women and girls in the Global South. Further, most empirical research on sexual harassment originates primarily from North America with little attention being paid to sexual harassment in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). There is a lack of clarity in the understanding of sexual harassment in a LMIC setting, such as Tanzania. The future of these movements will benefit from women and men-informed conceptualizations, definitions, and tools to measure sexual harassment in different contexts.

There are various definitions of sexual harassment. This study draws upon the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of sexual harassment as “any unwanted, unreciprocated and unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature that is offensive to the person involved, and causes that person to be threatened, humiliated or embarrassed” (WHO, 9 June 2002). Sexual harassment is often underreported as it may be considered milder than sexual violence, but is nevertheless destructive and it disproportionately impacts girls and women (Fielding-Miller R, Shabalala F, S, & Anita Raj A, 2019). It has significant physical, mental, social and health consequences for those who experience it (Bondestam & Lundqvist M, 2020; Friborg et al., 2017) and affects individuals' aspirations and behaviours. Though the phrase sexual harassment is generally

acknowledged to include damaging and offensive behaviours, its boundaries can be broad and are controversial. It may be conceptualized and framed differently by individual men and women, and the community at the micro and macro level. For example, women and girls may perceive and respond to various forms of harassment differently to men and boys. These varied perspectives have implications for prevention programmes and policies at the national level. Hearing the range of voices, including those of boys and men, is critical to develop strategies to engage positively with women, men and communities.

A clear conceptualization of sexual harassment is crucial to clarify policy and practice and to ensure that it is systematic and standardised measurement. Findings from the World Health Organization (WHO) multi-country study on violence against women indicates that Tanzania is one of the countries with the highest prevalence of non-partner sexual violence (García-Moreno C, Jansen H, Ellsberg M, Lori L, & Charlotte Watts C, 2005 ). The National Plan of Action to End Violence against Women and Children in Tanzania 2017/18 – 2021/22, explicitly mentions the need to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace and to end all other forms of sexual abuse (Government of United Republic of Tanzania & UNICEF and partners, December 2016).

However, there is lack of clarity on the meaning of sexual harassment and how it is conceptualized across different settings, especially in schools and public places. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to measure the practice and to assess the effects of it on victims' social and psychological health. Our study offers a first step towards understanding how men and women, adolescent boys and girls in different settings (schools, public places, workplaces) perceive and conceptualize sexual harassment in Tanzania.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

Connell's (1987) gender and power theory addresses the wider social and structural issues surrounding women such as distribution of power, and gender-specific norms within interaction of heterosexual relationships (Connell, 1987). Drawing on this theory, we hypothesize that sexual harassment occurs when gendered power inequalities exist between the sexes. This results in men having more power in a patriarchal society and exhibiting their power through engaging in sexually harassing behaviour (Bauni & Jarabi, 2000; Gysels, Pool, & Nnalusiba, 2002). Further, power and culture intertwine to influence the lived experience of sexual harassment. In many African societies, social norms have accorded men greater power than women and this has been upheld through physical strength, financial means, and societal institutions and gender based practices as well as masculine and feminine norms (Mill & Anarfi, 2002; Silberschmidt, 2005). The position of women is generally subordinate making them vulnerable to male sexual harassment. Hence, due to the existing social norms that have afforded men higher power and status than women, gender inequalities have been perpetuated and are reflected through sexual harassing behaviours in almost all spheres of life including schools, public and workspaces.

Connell's theory consists of three interdependent structures that explain the gendered relations between men and women. These structures are sexual division of power, sexual division of labour and the structure of the cathexis. The three social structures exist at the societal and the institutional levels and are rooted in society through historical and socio-political forces that consistently segregate power and ascribe social norms on the basis of gender-determined roles. The three social structures are maintained at an institutional level through inequitable practices that are reflected in mechanisms such as lack of equal employment equity between the sexes and discriminatory practices at home, school and work and the imbalance of control within

relationships (Connell, 1990). The presence of these social mechanisms constrains women's daily lifestyle practices by producing gendered expectations of women's role in the society and in many cases leading to experience, as well as tolerance of sexually harassing behaviours.

Alongside Connell's theory, the sex role spillover theory (Gutek & Morasch, 1982; Stockdale, Vaux, & Cashin, 1995) states that sexual harassment occurs because of cultural and social norms regarding sex roles which spill over into the workplace, thereby leading to sexual harassment. Women working in fields that are non-traditional for women, for example engineering, construction are viewed as breaking societal norms and are perceived to experience greater sexual harassment (Gutek & Morasch, 1982). However, sexual harassment may also occur when women are in positions reflective of traditional gender roles, for example, as a receptionist or waitress because their positions have been associated with sexual objectification of women or conventionally feminine qualities.

We draw on the gender and power theory (Connell, 1987) and the sex-role spillover theory (Gutek & Morasch, 1982; Stockdale et al., 1995) to understand how certain groups of people in Tanzania may perceive and experience sexual harassment across settings such as schools, work places and public spaces. We hypothesize that existing social norms that dictate gender roles and male-female interactions may influence the way society conceptualizes sexual harassment. Men in different settings may feel entitled by cultural norms to exercise control over women through physical and non-physical acts of a sexual nature, some that may be considered sexual harassment. On the other hand, women may perceive their experience of sexual harassment as normal and in-line with social norms.

## **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research design involving focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

### ***Study context***

This study was conducted in Mwanza city, a peri-urban area in North Western Tanzania and is located on the Southern shores of Lake Victoria. It is the second largest city in Tanzania after Dar es Salaam and as per the last census (2012) has a population size of 722,592 (Mwanza city council, 2012). As of 2016, the estimated GDP/capita in Mwanza region was USD 13,748 (9.7%), compared to USD 24,129 (17%) in Dar es Salaam (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The city is a major business and commercial center for trade in regions around Lake Victoria and neighboring countries of Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda (Overseas Development Institute, 2016).

### ***Sampling and data collection***

We conducted a total of 74 IDIs and 13 FGDs (with a total of 130 participants) (see Table 1) and sample participants from the following settings: workplaces, schools and public places. Our sample represents people from different socio-economic groups ranging from informal/ casual labour e.g., petty traders at marketplaces and motorbike public transport (*bodaboda*) riders, to those with a more stable income and with formal employment (e.g., government employees), herein referred to as workplace.



FGD participants were recruited from public places and educational settings using snowball sampling. Due to the difficulties in finding an acceptable number of participants for a group discussion, it was not possible to conduct FGDs in workplaces and with certain groups in public places. In order to recruit participants in the public places, permission was first sought from authorities within the selected study sites. Researchers then visited two public marketplaces in Mwanza town to select participants at marketplaces and motorbike public transport (*bodaboda*) parking areas. The researchers contacted three women and three men working at the market and three *bodaboda* riders. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and sought their permission to participate in the study and assistance with the recruitment of other participants in the public places. As the researchers familiarised themselves with participants, we employed purposive sampling to have a total of 10 people per group.

Participants from the educational settings were recruited from four public secondary schools in Nyamagana and Ilemela district. Permission to visit the schools was sought from the district education officer for the two districts. On arrival at the selected secondary schools, introductions were made with the school head teachers and permission sought to speak with girls and boys aged 15 to 18 years. After meeting the teachers, the researchers were introduced to three girls and three boys who in turn introduced the researchers to their network of friends at school. The researcher met with the contacts, explained the study objectives and invited them to participate in the FGD and if they agreed consent was sought from their caregivers prior to them signing the informed assent and participating in the study. FGDs took approximately two hours.

Since FGDs collect views at a general level, IDIs focused on individual experiences to differentiate the normative view as presented in FGDs to the real experience of sexual harassment by individuals. As indicated in Table 1, a total of 74 IDIs were conducted. For the IDIs, we selected a subset of participants from the pool of FGD participants from public places and schools. Their selection was based on their willingness to participate in an IDI, and knowledge of the topics of discussion during the FGD sessions. Participants for workplace IDIs were purposively sampled to represent the different cadres at the workplace. After meeting with the administrative authorities from the Mwanza city council, a list of potential participants (e.g. secretaries/receptionist, accounting, managers) were obtained, and participants asked to participate in an interview at a time that was convenient to them. The IDI guide explored individual experiences and personal reflections on the meaning of sexual harassment in detail.

Both the FGDs and IDIs were guided by semi-structured topic guides. We used an open-ended, discursive approach permitting for an iterative process of refinement, whereby lines of thought identified by earlier interviewees were taken up and presented to later interviewees (Mason, 2006). IDIs lasted one and half hours and were audio recorded with permission from the participants. Due to the sensitivity of this topic and the cultural tradition in the study context, participants in FGDs and IDIs were interviewed by interviewers of the same sex. The interviewers were trained social scientists with graduate and post-graduate degrees.

### ***Data analysis***

All FGDs and IDIs were transcribed verbatim and translated from Swahili into English. Analysis began during data collection. Our data were thematically analyzed with the aid of NVIVO 10

software. Analysis began with reading and re-reading transcripts by three researchers (including the first author) until content became intimately familiar. As data was reviewed, emergent themes were noted, and a list of codes created based on the research question (a priori codes) (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Three researchers assigned codes to specific sections of text so that the text could be easily and meaningfully searched and in the process of conducting the coding discussed emergent ideas.

Since qualitative data analysis consists of searching for patterns in data, after coding all the data, we worked within each code to identify principle sub-themes that reflect finer distinctions in the data. This process involved reviewing the clustered sub-themes to ensure that they represented the initial analysis and assigned codes. We then combined and assigned succinct phrases to describe the meaning of the theme. We identified four overarching themes that captured the phenomenon of how sexual harassment was conceptualized among diverse populations. One of these themes was perception and experiences of sexual harassment that was arrived at through combining sub-themes on “perceptions of sexual harassment” and “experiences of sexual harassment”. Finally, the overarching themes were summarized and written up and suitable and representative illustrative quotes were used to support the statements.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, we double-coded a random sample (10%) of transcripts. In the reporting of our results, we have adhered to qualitative way of presenting data. We use verbal counts such as “majority” or “most” to mean more than half of the total sample), “many” (between quarter to half the total sample) “few” (about a quarter the total sample) (Chang, Voils, Sandelowski, Hasselblad, & Crandell, 2009; Sandelowski, 2001). This is different from the use of

the actual numbers of the participants for a particular view as is the case with quantitative studies. Ensuring credibility is key aspect of qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). We ensured credibility of findings through: 1) prolonged engagement with participants, probing their responses and encouraging them to give examples to support their statements; 2) the triangulation of methods (FGDs and IDIs), as well as exploration of the meaning of sexual harassment from different perspectives (e.g. work place, public places and school settings) and 3) investigator triangulation, whereby we engaged four researchers and three analysts and; 4) participant validation by presenting back the results to participants during discussions for clarification and later to check on whether they agreed with our interpretation of the findings.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Medical Research Coordination Committee of the National Institutes for Medical Research and the Ethics committee at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Verbal and written informed consent were sought from all participants above 18 years. For those below the age of 18 years parental consent was sought in addition to participant assent.

### **Results**

Girls and boys, women and men in this study reported a range of different perspectives on what constitutes sexual harassment that ranged from lewd comments to rape. The role of consent, sexual harassment as an expression of male power, and social norms around sexual contact were thematic areas that distinguished sexual harassment from accepted forms of courtship and behaviour

## Perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment

When probed on their understanding of sexual harassment most participants referred to acts that involved sexual intercourse and not acts that might occur prior to intercourse or other forms of sexual contact. They sometimes conflated sexual harassment with sexual violence with many describing it as rape or forced sex. Men in public spaces reported that sexual harassment must be a violent sexual act such as rape and hence did not consider touching as harmful:

*Many Tanzanians only think that sexual harassment involves beating and raping, and not insults, touching, or shouting at someone. [FGD, young men aged 15-24 years, public place]*

The views of adult men about sexual harassment involving extreme acts of sexual violence such as rape were also echoed among schoolboys. When asked to mention examples of sexual harassment, majority of the participant immediately mentioned rape.

*First it is raping her, second, taking her far way to show her where you live or locking her inside a room with you and forcing her to have sex. [IDI#04-Kiloleli-school boy-04]*

Despite this confusion, many men were clear that sexual harassment did not only involve violent sexual acts but also insulting behaviour and physical violence that is gendered in nature. A *bodadoda* rider at a public place described the meaning of sexual harassment as:

*What I understand is that sexual harassment isn't just hitting someone....Even a single word or a statement is already harassment...even a bad word like "stupid" is harassment, because you leave the victim asking herself if she is stupid... You leave her with more questions than answers, so you have harassed her.... Or you force her to have sex...That is sexual abuse because you don't have her consent... [IDI, 28-year-old- man, public place]*

Verbal harassment ranged from mild words of a sexual nature to more vulgar words spoken by men towards girls and women. Perpetrators of verbal harassment varied from total strangers on the streets to acquaintances at school, in the community and even at workplaces. Women in public

places described unacceptable acts of a sexual nature from men to women as involving fabricated stories that were meant to tarnish their reputation:

*Sexual advances that are not acceptable are many. I mean, someone does to you something that you do not like...maybe you don't like/love him... then you find that he fabricates stories to tarnish your reputation. He tells people that you are his [girlfriend]... He just lies. [DI 30-year-old woman, public place]*

Many girls and women also considered sexual harassment as the non-verbal gestures of a sexual nature that causes them discomfort. Examples of gestures of this nature were staring, winking and signals of a sexual nature expressed by men towards girls and women. Schoolgirls reported that boys and male teachers stared at their breasts and buttocks and passed lewd comments towards them. Describing the effects of the non-verbal harassment behaviours towards girls and women men in public places reported:

*For example, she is walking, and you just stare at her... that staring makes her uncomfortable to a point where she trips over and falls. You have given her a very hard time... She starts asking herself why you are looking at her in that way while she has not done you any wrong. [IDI, 28-year-old man, public place]*

However, in as much as many of the men in public places had involved themselves in acts that could be considered unwanted or unwelcome, some reported they remained unsure of the meaning of sexual harassment.

*I am not sure of the meaning of sexual harassment, but I think they are words that you say to a woman that are not good. When she hears them, it becomes a problem, and she can't feel happy about it. [IDI, 26-year-old man, workplace]*

Hence, men mentioned that they did not know that the acts of men touching girls and women without their consent or passing lewd comments was harassment and suggested that men should be educated about acts that constitute sexual harassment in order to address this behaviour.

*Now to end this [sexual harassment], means you must be made aware of what it means...that for instance touching a woman without her consent means sexual harassment. [FGD, young men aged 18-24 public places]*

### **The role of consent in conceptualizing sexual harassment**

The majority of participants drew on the concept of consent when differentiating between acts that qualified or not as sexual harassment. School boys differentiated between wanted and unwanted sexual advances, by describing the wanted advances as those where both parties consented, whilst unwanted as being those where only one partner is interested in the relationship or sex while the other one is not. Participants emphasized that it was important that both parties consent before the sexual act occurs but any other actions that precede the sexual act itself also requires mutual agreement. They further reported that unwanted sexual advances are usually perpetrated by strangers on the streets and are equivalent to rape:

*Wanted sexual advances are those whereby they know each other...they meet and agree with each other...But for the sexual advances that are unacceptable...It is like when a person in the streets forces a student to do those things [sex], or it's like rape. Those are sexual acts that are unwanted. [IDI, 18-year-old schoolboy]*

Further describing the notion of consent in the context of male to female interactions, schoolgirls reported:

*Acceptable acts are those both of you agree upon...Since you have agreed, that is why he did it [touched you]. Unacceptable ones are those he does to you by force [FGD, Schoolgirls, aged 15-18 years]*

Most participants described the dyadic relationship as vital to differentiate acts of a sexual nature that were acceptable versus those that were not.

*The difference between signs of sexual interest that are accepted and those that are not, is the use of force. What is unacceptable is where one uses coercion to get someone else or gets them to do something against their will....the use of force is unacceptable...But the*

*signs of a sexual act that is acceptable is when you've spoken with someone, they have agreed with you [IDI, 27-year-old man, public place]*

Consent was expressed implicitly in most cases. Adolescent girls and young women had similar views on how a lack of clear communication and consent before sex was coercion and sometimes resulted in rape. Coercion sometimes involved men pestering women to consent to their sexual advances and was considered unacceptable:

*It is that situation of wanting to have sex with a person when the person is not ready with what you are telling them... then you continue pressurizing them and now you start doing other things that affects her...That's what I think is sexual harassment. [IDI, woman, 26 years, workplace]*

The majority participants in all settings described unwanted touching and unexpected embraces as the main characteristics of sexual harassment. Unconsented touching of private parts such as breasts or buttocks usually happened by total strangers and sometimes acquaintances.

*These are actions that happen without a person's consent. That is sexual harassment because sex is not something that you force. Even touching you without your consent that is harassment. [IDI, 23-year-old man workplace]*

While differentiating unwanted versus wanted touching of private parts, a woman from the public place reported:

*There is being touched and you don't mind, maybe you like it, but there is being touched without wanting or without your approval...there are different types of touching ranging from just greetings [handshake] just to know how you are doing....But there is a different situation, for example, when someone touches your breast, and you haven't consented. [IDI, 24-year-old woman, public place].*

Participants in public places described men in informal professions such as *daladala* drivers, public transport motorbike [*bodaboda*] riders, as those who mainly touched girls and women



despite being strangers to them during their transportation business. A *bodaboda* rider admitted to touching a female customer without her consent:

*Sometimes you hug a girl against her wishes. You even don't know each other...right.... Or you see a guy touching her on her buttocks or her breasts...So all these are forms of sexual harassment. [IDI, 28-year-old-man, public place]*

### **Sexual harassment as an expression of male power**

Most participants including men and boys agreed that primarily women were the targets and men the perpetrators of sexual harassment. Only a few men reported experiencing sexual harassment by women. This theme was salient in schools and workplaces with most participants reporting that men in position of power and in possession of material resources took advantage of girls and women's vulnerability to coerce them into sex.

*Aah, according to my views, sexual harassment is where a man wants[seduces] a woman without her consent. For example, we have interviews here at work. But since I know her, you tell her privately that it is a must that you make love with me so that I can give you this position. [IDI 36-year-old-man, workplace]*

A schoolgirl recounted the sexual harassment from male teachers as indicated below:

*Now, that teacher wants her and if the student refuses him, he becomes stubborn and comes every now and then to fetch her from class and claim that she has done a mistake, just like that. [IDI, 18-year-old, schoolgirl]*

Girls and women described the gendered power inequalities that existed in their communities as driving sexual harassment.

*In my place of work when someone is older than you and he is your superior, they would want you by force. That is what I think is sexual harassment. [IDI, 25-year-old woman, workplace]*

A young woman from a public place reported:

*My understanding of sexual harassment is that it is when someone uses force or power and money to have sex with someone. [IDI, 20-year-old young woman, public place]*

Schoolgirls also described a situation of men in positions of power taking advantage of girls looking for employment by having sex with them in exchange for employment favor in the following:

*Sexual harassment is that act of being in love with someone without her permission. For example, I have a problem and am looking for a job in a certain company. When I approach the boss, he tells me that if I don't sleep with him, he can't give me a job and yet my aim was a job and not sex. [FDG, schoolgirls aged 15-20 years]*

Another woman reported her experience of sexual harassment and how she was encouraged to tolerate it if she wanted to remain on the job.

*When he touched me, I told him that I did not like his behavior of touching me every time. Then he told me that I would either tolerate the men there [organisation] or would have to quit my job at the organisation because those who work there were already used to it [touching]. [ID, 32-year-old woman, workplace]*

Masculinity was enhanced by a man's physical strength. Girls in public places reported that men took advantage of their physical strength relative to that of women to sexually harass women because they could not easily resist them.

*Because you haven't permitted that, he uses force and if it happens that he is stronger than you, he rapes you. [IDI, 22-year-old young woman, public place]*

A man working in the public space further described the role of masculinity:

*Some do it because they want to show that they are "real men" and they know that women won't do anything... [IDI, 28-year-old man, public place]*

Gender inequalities sometimes placed women in vulnerable occupations that made them prone to acts of sexual harassment. Women engaged in economic activities that reflected traditional

feminine roles such as cooking, selling food at kiosks and petty trade while men owned and managed large profitable businesses. Reflecting on women's engagement in these roles in public places and streets and how they endured such behaviours from men to keep their businesses going, a man reported:

*Like those who are selling tea and other cooked foods....she can't refuse it [touching], because she is looking for customers. She is enduring the touching and that job because she has no option and because she wants to have and keep customers to buy her food. [IDI, 21-year-old man, public place]*

Further giving an example of how the existing labor market pushed women to engage in occupations that predisposed them to sexual harassment, a businessman reported how men used their financial power to harass women:

*You find that there are many eating places on that street, and she works in one of them, cooking and supplying food to customers. After delivering food, she collects the money later at the end of the day. When she arrives, most of the men demand to hug her and if she refuses, then men threaten not to pay her. Some of the men would also say, "Who are you not to be fucked?". [IDI, 20-year-old-young man, public place]*

Gender power was further reflected in intergenerational sexual encounters. Both schoolboys and girls reported that intergenerational sex was problematic and constituted older men sexually harassing girls. Schoolboys reported that intergenerational transactional sex involved older wealthy men taking advantage of younger women by using their wealth to entice younger women into having sex without their total consent.

*I mean sexual harassment is when a man wants a person who is younger than him and he wants her for sex [FGD, schoolgirls aged 15-20 years]*

### **Social norms regarding acceptable sexual contact and sexual harassment**

The social norms around male and female interactions and acceptable ways of expressing sexual interest also determined the behaviors that were perceived as sexual harassment. Participants

differentiated acts of sexual harassment from socially acceptable seduction or courtship practices within their communities through the following: who said or perpetrated them (stranger versus a familiar person), where the acts took place (in public places versus in private spaces), the motives behind those acts and reactions.

The relationship between those involved in the act of sexual harassment was important in determining whether it was harassment or not. For example, if the perpetrator was a total stranger, then unwelcome touching, verbal or non-verbal acts of a sexual nature were likely to be considered as sexual harassment. However, the situation became less clear when it involved the same acts, but the person involved was an acquaintance. This was further complicated by whether individuals involved had a relationship or were interested in developing a sexual relationship and were using certain expressions, for example touching, verbal and non-verbal signals as acts of seduction and courtship.

*It is that situation of feeling like you would like to be with someone. By nature, whether a woman or a man, there is that desire to be in relationship with someone, either with or without her permission. It is like you touch her in a way that is not allowed. [FGD, schoolgirls aged 15-20 years]*

The location where these unwelcome acts of a sexual nature occur determined whether participants perceived an act as sexual harassment or not. The social norms around seduction and courtship dictated that men express sexual interest privately using certain cues. This was regardless of the perpetrator or nature of relationship that existed between the opposite sexes. For example, if the act of touching, commenting or a signal of a sexual nature happened in a public place, then clearly the girl or woman felt shamed and thus considered the boy or the man as harassing them. Hence, a man touching a girl or woman's buttocks or breasts in public was perceived inappropriate and

offensive. However, if the same act happened in private and was done by a boyfriend or a man she was attracted to, then it was considered normal seduction. Describing a moralistic viewpoint of what was or not allowed, schoolgirls reported:

*Another difference is that some of the sexual enticements used by men indicate they have bad morals.... morals that are not allowed in the African culture. Now for example, you have sat and he starts touching you in public, that portrays a bad image in the society and in the African culture. [FGD, schoolgirls, aged 15-20 years]*

Further, the motive behind a particular action was important in determining whether an incident was harassment or not. For example, positive comments of praise were not considered harassment. Yet, if the man's intention was to shame a girl or woman through such comments and changed the tone to say the same words then that was considered outright sexual harassment.

*Sexual harassment is the act of a man insulting [kutukana] and embarrassing a woman. [IDI, 39-year-old woman, public place]*

The majority of participants reported that a girl or woman's reaction to sexual harassment while or immediately after it happened was crucial in determining whether they or the community considered the incident as sexual harassment. The expectation was for women and girls to resist vehemently if touched inappropriately by a stranger or someone they did not like. If they did not show any signs of disapproval, for example, through visible resistance towards the perpetrator, then that incidence was considered as 'consented'. An adolescent girl working in a marketplace described this as follows:

*You would find that someone is being touched by a stranger in inappropriate places [private parts] ....like the way we see in crowded places ...if she just continues as if nothing has happened or if she just keeps quiet after this happening, that girl will have accepted that situation...because for a girl who has not consented, she can't just be touched around the waist and buttocks and she keeps quiet...she has to react by insulting the person who touched her [IDI, 22-year-old young woman, public place]*

More than half of the schoolgirls reported that if a girl was touched or verbally harassed and did not react to this openly for others to view her disapproval of the action, then that may be dismissed by the community as normal seduction or courtship. They reported that peers reacted differently with some taking the touching as a normal thing while others felt offended and resisted the action.

*I mean it depends on the person concerned. The difference is how the person concerned thinks about that thing [act of harassment]. So, it is entirely dependent on the victim herself. [IDI, schoolboy-aged-17-years]*

## **Discussion**

This study outlines how different population groups in Tanzania conceptualize sexual harassment to better understand the meaning and lived experiences of sexual harassment. The most common form of sexual harassment reported by participants in our study was verbal sexual harassment, such as lewd comments and non-verbal gestures of a sexual nature including touching. These findings align with the WHO's definition of sexual harassment (WHO, 9 June 2002) that characterizes sexual harassment as unwanted and unwelcome sexual and verbal advances that occur without the consent of both parties. Although there appeared to be a good understanding of what constituted sexual harassment, there was a lack of clarity on the concept. Our findings show that participants conflated the term sexual harassment with sexual violence such as rape or forced sex, and less with acts that did not involve sexual intercourse. This conflation has implications for the measurement of sexual harassment and may lead to underreporting of this behaviour, as individuals may not report the non-penetrative or non-violent experiences that characterize sexual harassment in our study. Our findings also provide evidence of the fluidity in the meaning of sexual harassment and the crucial role that context plays in situating it. Whether an act was considered sexual harassment varied by many factors,

with consent, gendered power and social and cultural norms emerging as key components (as depicted in Figure 1).

Importantly, our study demonstrates that consent is closely linked to unequal gendered power between perpetrators and those harassed. Importantly, notions of gendered power underpin consent and the dynamics of sexual harassment. In settings where sexual consent is implicit, uncertainty may linger about the meaning of consent, its variation that is based on a number of contextual factors and the situation of those involved (Pavithra Rao, 2018). As elaborated by Connell (1987) the sexual division of power and labor and the nexus with institutional and societal level norms and policies further perpetuate power imbalances. As depicted by the narratives in our study and in the literature, sexual interactions and relationships in schools, workplaces and public places were characterized by gender inequalities. Men in positions of power or wealth took advantage of girls and women by asking them for sex in exchange for employment, promotion and other favors; acts that have previously also been described as constituting sexual harassment, especially in higher educational settings and workplaces (Dranzoa, 2018; Gouws & Kritzinger, 1995; Pavithra Rao, 2018).

Although men and women, boys and girls in our study talked about consent as a vital concept in understanding sexual harassment, its operationalization varied, implying that consent is a fluid concept that varies across cultures and social groups. For example, even though schoolgirls reported the existence of displeasing behaviours from male teachers, there was still some ambiguity regarding whether what they were experiencing was sexual harassment or normal seduction behaviour. They did not take action for fear of reprisal from their superiors. Other

studies have noted schoolgirls underreporting their experience of sexual harassment due to poor systems of dealing with the issue in schools (Prinsloo, 2006). Workplace sexual harassment has also often been under-reported due to unequal power issues and women's fear of losing employment if they reported an incident of sexual harassment (Marsh et al., 2009). Measuring consent on its own therefore will not yield true answers as it is clearly linked to gendered power. Women food vendors mainly serving a predominantly male population in public spaces were exposed to more sexual harassment and were often compelled to tolerate or risk losing income. This aligns with the sex role spillover theory (Gutek & Morasch, 1982) as women in conventional 'feminine' roles are often subject to sexual objectification and sexually harassing act.

The social norms around male and female interactions and expressions of sexual interest were another crucial indicator in delineating what was considered and not considered to be sexual harassment. There exists a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable acts of seduction, depending on the nature of the perpetrator, the location and the reaction of the woman or girl. For example, acts such as physical embraces, compliments and touching were common in non-harassing sexual relationships as well as in those that involved sexual harassment. The same acceptable behaviour for seduction becomes problematic when it occurs in public with the motive of embarrassing or shaming the girl.

The *nature* of the perpetrator distinguished what was considered as sexual harassment or not. If the perpetrator was a stranger engaging in unwelcome sexual acts such as touching a girl or woman or expressing a gesture of sexual interest, then that would be outright sexual harassment.



However, if the same acts happened between men and women who were acquaintances, then that may not be considered simply or directly sexual harassment and would depend on other factors e.g., the victim's judgement of the acts and reaction to the incident. The *place* where the unwelcome acts of a sexual nature happened especially those that involved strangers was also important. For instance, if a man touched a girl in public, then that would be considered as unacceptable and embarrassing to the girl regardless of whether they were acquaintances or not. In our study, these incidents of sexual harassment involving perpetrators who were total strangers usually occurred in public spaces such as crowded bus terminals, outdoor marketplaces, and public transport. The findings on the *perpetrator* playing a role in the determination of when an unwelcome act is sexual harassment is worth exploring further as it may underestimate sexual harassment that involve acquaintances and romantic partnerships that may happen in in schools, families and workplaces.

The difference in age between the perpetrator and those experiencing sexual harassment played an important role in the understanding of what acts constitutes sexual harassment. Worth noting was the schoolgirls' reference to sexual advances by older men towards younger women as also constituting sexual harassment. Such relationships were characterized by power differences that made it difficult for the girls to exercise consent. Evidence shows that intergenerational sexual relationships, though common in sub-Saharan Africa are problematic as they increase the risk for sexual and reproductive health problems, such as HIV among vulnerable girls and young women (Evan et al., 2016; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Stoner et al., 2019; Wamoyi et al., 2018). Hence, interventions for addressing sexual harassment should consider intergenerational sexual interest in low-income settings like Tanzania. Measurement of the behaviour especially among

young women below the age of puberty, where any kind of penetrative sex is illegal in Tanzania by default, should encompass an aspect of intergenerational sex. This is also the group that experiences increased sexual harassment but may not seek help for various reasons including a fear of the consequences from powerful older men (Pavithra Rao, 2018).

We found that *girl's or women's reactions* to their lived experiences of the acts of sexual harassment depended on existing community or social norms. These social norms determined appropriate interactions and expressions of sexual interest among people of the opposite sex. Given that acts of sexual harassment are pervasive, there maybe underreport the behaviour as it may not be considered as something serious in need of attention by the community. Moreover, attaching the definition of harassment on a victim's reaction is problematic. It is apparent that the victims' perception of what is happening is important as it determines how they act and whether they take action against perpetrators or not. Although the perpetrator should know that what they are doing is unacceptable (Smit & Du Plessis, 2011), this was not always the case, as observed in our study. Some men were unsure if some of their behaviour towards women were sexual harassment. These findings point to the importance of understanding context and community perceptions of a practice when conceptualizing behaviour that has fluid boundaries like sexual harassment. Even though many of the acts of sexual harassment that girls/women in these communities' experience are unreported and may be underestimated, they cause psychological stress and need to be addressed. Girls reported feeling embarrassed when a man touched their private parts in public or passed a lewd comment drawing similarities with other studies that have reported on the effects of sexual harassment (Dranzoa, 2018; Smit & Du Plessis, 2011).

There is thus a need for community awareness on the effects of sexual harassment on the victims.

Similar to other research, this study has strengths and limitations. The fact that this research was conducted in different population groups and settings provides a nuanced understanding of the conceptualization of sexual harassment from multiple angles. A notable limitation of the study is that despite participants being reassured of confidentiality, it is possible that those in schools and workplaces may have felt uncomfortable to talk about sexual harassment from their senior managers and teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Sexual harassment is a fluid concept whose definitions depend on several contextual factors. These findings have implications for how sexual harassment is conceptualized and how questions to assess the magnitude of sexual harassment are formulated, particularly in the context of a low- and middle-income country. Consent underlies the conceptualization of sexual harassment and should be fundamental in how the behaviour is defined and measured in Tanzania. Schools, workplaces and communities need to be in agreement about what constitutes sexual harassment and surveys designed to measure the magnitude of the behaviour and its effects on victims and society in LMIC contexts.

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