

***“It gives you a feeling of pride when you touch her”*: The role of masculinity in sexual harassment of adolescent schoolgirls in Tanzania**

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Abstract

Sexual harassment or the unwanted offensive behaviours that women and girls experience is a pervasive global challenge. Yet, there is limited evidence on the lived experiences of sexual harassment from school-based settings in sub-Saharan Africa. We explore students' perceived experiences, perpetration, and drivers of sexual harassment in schools in Mwanza, Tanzania. This study employed a qualitative research design involving 30 in-depth interviews and seven focus group discussions with 30 male and 40 female secondary school pupils aged 13 to 19 years. Data was analysed using a thematic approach. The findings show that experiences of sexual harassment among schoolgirls were widespread. Common forms of harassment were verbal and non-verbal gestures of a sexual nature. The desire to prove one's masculinity and peer pressure were key drivers of perpetration among schoolboys. Teachers took advantage of their positions of authority to sexually harass female pupils and employed corporal punishment to those who resisted their advances. Sexual harassment had multiple negative outcomes, including schoolgirls dropping out of school and mental health issues, such as anxiety, stress and poor academic performance. Girls rarely reported sexual harassment for fear of further victimisation and stigma from others. Sexual harassment of girls is common in secondary schools in Mwanza and is mainly driven by peer pressure and the desire to prove one's masculinity. Given its harmful effects, there is a need to implement clear policies to protect girls, support confidential disclosure and reporting and to address toxic masculinity norms among young men.

List of keywords: Sexual harassment, masculinity, adolescent schoolgirls, Schools, Tanzania

Introduction

Sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted, unreciprocated and unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature that is offensive to the person involved, and might reasonably be expected to cause offence, humiliation or intimidation to the person (WHO, 9 June 2002). This includes physical, verbal and non-verbal gestures of a sexual nature (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Despite an increase in the awareness of sexual harassment, it continues to be a pervasive global problem for girls and young women (Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Lori, & Watts, 2005). Among adolescent girls, sexual harassment is linked to unwanted pregnancy and sexual transmitted infections(Christofides et al., 2014; Grose, Chen, Roof, Rachel, & Yount, 2021). It also negatively affects schoolgirls' learning environment, motivation, and self-confidence (Prinsloo, 2006), with negative consequences on their learning and education (Mamaru, Getachew, & Mohammed, 2015). Moreover, sexual harassment may also lead to long-term physical and mental health effects, such as psychological distress and depression (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Hall & Hall, 2011; Prinsloo, 2006).

Despite the negative impacts, the perception of sexual harassment and its significance may vary by context and is often neither recognised, questioned nor addressed. While adolescent girls may perceive certain male behaviours towards them as sexual harassment, men may see this as normalised interaction with the opposite sex (Wamoyi, Ranganathan, Mugunga, & Stöckl, 2021) more, within a patriarchal context, adolescent schoolgirls may be at increased risk of experiencing such behaviours with limited knowledge on how to speak up and defend themselves.

Theoretical approach

Connell's theory of gender and power (Connell, 1987) has been instrumental in understanding the ways in which social hierarchy of the sexes are reproduced over time. This theory describes three interrelated processes: the sexual division of labour, power and the structure of the cathexis. While the division of power encourages male authority, the cathexis stipulates socially acceptable roles and behaviours. These behaviours are very much determined and influenced by gender norms especially those promoting masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is a social structural construct that explains the legitimisation of masculinities through social institutions and social groups (Morrell, Jewkes, & Lindegger, 2012). The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), is utilised in this study to understand attitudes and practices of boys/men that perpetuate gender inequalities and dominion over women through sexual harassment.

In this paper, hegemonic masculinity is theorized to act as a catalyst for sexual harassment as it reflects gender inequalities that exist in many African societies, with cultural dynamics that promote female acquiescence to male power (Ganle, 2016; Morrell et al., 2012). Sexual harassment is thus a form of male expression of power and dominance over women (Heilman & Barker, 2018). Although young men operate with the notion that "real manhood" is about domination and that they are expected to display confidence when approaching girls (Heilman & Barker, 2018), girls may perceive some of those interactions with men as sexual harassment (Wamoyi et al., 2021).

Although sexual harassment is common among girls, boys too experience it to some extent (Collings, 2005; Meinck et al., 2017; Ward, Artz, Leoschut, Kassanjee, & Burton, 2018). Due to the high rates of sexual harassment among girls than boys, this paper's focus is on girls. Girls are

more vulnerable to sexual harassment due to gender power dynamics as a result of sexual norms and expectations (Howard-Merrill et al., 2020; MacPherson, Richards, Namakhoma, & Theobald, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2021).

Schoolgirls exposed to sexual harassment, on the other hand, experience loss of control over their lives as they are often in a powerless position relative to the harasser, especially when the perpetrator is a teacher or in a position of authority (Ganle, 2016; Jewkes et al., 2015; Morrell et al., 2012). This relative power differential makes reporting of sexual harassment challenging, either for fear of reprisal or because it risks recurring, although remaining silent also exposes them to the risk of re-occurrence. Despite the clear theoretical basis and the increased awareness of sexual harassment globally, there is limited evidence of lived experiences from school settings, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, and Tanzania in particular. The broader study set out to understand: the conceptualisation of sexual harassment; dimensions of sexual harassment; interactions between harassment and structural violence; and the measurement of sexual harassment across settings. This paper explores students' perceived experiences, perpetration, and drivers of sexual harassment in schools in Mwanza, Tanzania.

Methods

Study design and data collection

We conducted a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 16 girls and 14 boys and seven focus group discussions (FGDs) with 30 schoolboys and 40 girls aged 13-19 years. Fieldwork was conducted in Mwanza city, a peri-urban area in North-western Tanzania, where the age of secondary schooling is 13 to 19 years on average. Government owned and public

secondary schools were selected for the study because they present the most typical education avenue that the majority of students attend.

Using purposive snowball sampling, we sampled participants from four government owned, and public secondary schools in Mwanza city. After obtaining the necessary approvals from the district education officer and the school head teachers, the research team met with teachers and explained to them the objective of the study. The teachers were asked to introduce the researchers to three boys and girls. The teachers purposively sampled six students based on age (14-18 years), most popular/active and the quietest/reserved in school. Teachers were informed that this initial group of students would be crucial for snowball sampling of many others of interest to the study. After the researcher meeting with the six students, they were asked to invite their network of friends at school to participate in the FGDs. The researcher met with their networks, explained the objective of the study and invited them to a participatory FGD.

Verbal and written informed consent were sought from all participants above 18 years and participant's consent and parental assent for those below 18 years. Each FGD comprised of ten participants and were conducted at school after school hours and lasted for approximately two hours. In addition to the normative views collected in the FGDs, IDIs provided individual personal experiences of sexual harassment. Based on their willingness to participate, their levels of enthusiasm in the FGD and their knowledge of the topics during the FGDs, we invited a subset of participants from the FGD to participate in the IDIs. The IDIs took approximately 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded.

Both the FGDs and IDIs were guided by semi-structured topic guides. The research topics focused on participants' understanding and experience of sexual harassment, types of sexual harassment, norms and expectations about girls' experience of sexual harassment and views on intervening on sexual harassment. 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). All participants were given refreshment during IDIs and FGDs. Same sex interviewers were used for both FGDs and IDIs, due to the sensitivity of this topic and the cultural tradition in the study context. The trained interviewers were social scientists with graduate and post-graduate degrees. In addition to all participants being provided with information on where to seek help if they felt distressed, the researchers also followed up with them at them at the end of each IDI and FGD and a week after to ask if they preferred to be connected to project counsellor and or community social welfare officer, but none opted for this.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Medical Research Coordination Committee of xxx, Tanzania and xxx, United Kingdom. Tanzanian ethical clearance obtained from the Medical Research Coordination Committee (NIMR/HQ/R.8a/vol.IX/3050) and UK, from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (ref16116).

Data analysis

All FGDs and IDIs were transcribed verbatim and translated from Swahili into English. Data were thematically analysed using NVIVO 10. Thematic analysis provides a rich and detailed account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved six stages. The first stage was familiarisation with data which began with reading and re-reading transcripts until content became intimately

familiar. Second was creation of a list of codes based on reading of data that appeared meaningful and thereafter assigning the codes to the data. The third stage involved searching for emerging themes. As noted by Ryan (2003), theme identification is a key process of qualitative research. During this stage, we worked within each code to identify themes that reflect finer distinctions in the data. Stage four involved reviewing of the identified themes for coherent patterns. The fifth stage involved defining and refining the important themes as they relate to our objectives. A detailed analysis was conducted for each theme and sub-themes. The final stage was the write-up of themes as presented in the results. To ensure inter-coder reliability (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules N, 2007), we double-coded a random 10% of a sample of transcripts.

Results

We present findings from three themes: forms of sexual harassment reported by schoolgirls; men's motivation for sexual harassment; and the negative consequences of sexual harassment to girls.

Forms of sexual harassment of experienced among schoolgirls

When asked about their experiences with the opposite sex almost all schoolgirls reported encountering both verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment in and out of school settings. Older girls with fully developed bodies seemed to experience more harassment than those whose bodies were not fully developed. They talked about their developing body parts as centers of attraction for male teachers and boys at school and men in public places. One girl narrated her experience at school in the following quote:

It happened right here at school when I was called to the staff room by the teacher. He at first asked me why my sweater had no school badge. He then asked me how old I was and when I

told him that I was eighteen years, he told his fellow male teacher that I was the right person to have sex with because I was an adult like them. [IDI, schoolgirl, aged 18 years]

Verbal harassment involved lewd comments and derogatory words from men, including schoolboys, teachers and men in public places.

Lewd comments and derogatory words

Schoolgirls described verbal harassment as involving lewd comments directed towards them by the opposite sex as a common occurrence. Male teachers commented on girls' developing bodies during class sessions:

He [teacher] starts to tell her that she is good looking... she has a good body shape. Now she feels uncomfortable because he is her teacher. When that happened, the girl was blamed, yet it was the teacher who started... The students laughed.... The teacher continued with class as if nothing had happened, yet she was ashamed.

[FGD, schoolgirls, 16-19 years]

Schoolgirls described male teachers commenting on girls' developing bodies during class sessions and thus making girls uncomfortable. In response to the fear of verbal harassment from male teachers and male students, girls resolved to hiding their developing bodies from them.

You know we women are blessed you get a person with very nice breasts so when she puts on a shirt, they remain standing and when she covers herself with a sweater you can't see them... We have kept them[sweaters] because normally when a teacher comes in class, he says that we are exposing our chests for him to see. But when you hide it like this [cover chest area], he asks "you what you are hiding" ...As for me I put it because there is a

teacher whenever he comes to class, he calls out my name and asks me what it is that I am hiding. [FGD, Schoolgirls, 16-18 years]

Male students reported that the comments related to one's body objectified girls, but men used them to signal sexual interest in with girls:

A word like manta, is street language used by wahuni [hooligan] to refer to girls. Men also call them demu, meaning a sex object [FGD, schoolboys, 15-19]

Similar to male teachers, shaming and embarrassing girls was common among male students. Schoolboys acted under the influence of peer pressure and often used derogatory language related to girls' biological functions to insult and shame schoolgirls:

As a result of peer pressure, you find that boys abuse girls by throwing matusi ya nguoni [obscene words] at them... Some tell them that they are cursed by God and that is the reason why they menstruate every month... they say girls are fools and will remain to be women. [FGD, schoolboys, aged 16-19 years]

To impress their peers, boys also fabricate negative stories about girls to their peers:

When boys say they have slept with a certain girl and yet they haven't, they are trying to shame her. You say that even though she is refusing to sleep with me, I already know her intimately. You want her to feel bad because she has refused to have sex with you. [FGD, schoolboys, 16-19 years]

Many male students sought to tarnish the reputation of girls who looked neat and well-dressed at school. Schoolboys discussed how schoolgirls from poor families were stigmatised for owning things they could not afford by engaging in transactional sex. They would shame and embarrass them through jokes that affect their self-esteem.

...Some boys insult girls for being poor and that they depend on men for their upkeep. When they see them wearing a nice shirt, they tell her that men bought it for her. As the boy says those words, the whole class laughs at the girl, while they praise the boy. [FGD, schoolboys, aged 16-19 years]

As a strategy to deter men and boys from harassing them further, schoolgirls sometimes unwillingly entered sexual relationships with men who had previously sexually harassed them. Yet, many reported an increase in verbal harassment afterwards by men who had reduced interest in them, as they had accomplished their goal of having sex with them. Generally, sexual harassment perpetuated more sexual harassment.

After being insulted and told filthy words, other men she had previously rejected [when seduced] also started calling her names. Some called her Malaya [prostitute]. [IDI, schoolgirl, 17 years]

Verbal sexual harassment of schoolgirls did not end at school but was also widespread in the communities. Schoolgirls reported verbal harassment in marketplaces and public transport on their way home:

I was in the bus heading home and most passengers got off at earlier stops. Only two girls remained on the bus with the conductor and driver. The conductor told me that he like/loves

*me and when I refused, he started complaining saying that girls are so arrogant nowadays.
[IDI, schoolgirl, 18 years]*

Non-verbal harassment

Unwanted touching was the commonest form of non-verbal harassment experienced by schoolgirls. Non-verbal harassment involved acts such as unwanted touching, exposure to pornography, as men staring at their private parts. A schoolgirl narrated her experience of being touched by male students in her class in the following:

It happened right here at school . We are in the same class with that boy....He just comes and starts caressing me on my shoulders or sometimes the other one comes and start holding me on my waist and I don't like it. [IDI, schoolgirl aged 18 years]

Unwanted touching by male students and teachers targeted at girls' body parts, and sometimes included unwanted hugging. It occurred in school offices, staff rooms, classrooms, playgrounds and after school. Girls described how some male teachers took advantage of being with girls alone in the library or in the staffroom to harass them.

This male teachers like touching girls' chest parts, on the waist and even others touches buttocks....Yes it is right there in the office ...He will call you and start asking you about certain stories with an intention of wanting to know more about you, he will ask you if you have ever had a boyfriend, and if you tell him no he will want to know the reason because of your age [fully grown body] ...He will want to know what you are waiting for ...he tells you will become crazy if you wait for too long[without sex]. As he is speaking, he is holding your shoulders or hands and directing his hands to parts of the body he is

not supposed to reach... Yes, he touches you on the buttocks and chest [IDI, schoolgirl, 19 years]

A second girl reported her experience with a male teacher in the following:

I can confess that when it comes to male teachers, I have been affected personally. Sometime back I could not enter a class without putting a sweater around my neck to cover my bust. I asked myself, "how comes when I enter in the staffroom every male teacher looks at my bust and the lower side"? I kept asking myself these questions, but I never told anyone, I just thought it to myself. [FGD, schoolgirls, 16-18 years].

When asked why they thought men touched girls, some thought they touched girls because they were attractive:

"They also want to touch and see, maybe you have nice breasts or a nice arse, they want to touch you so they can satisfy their bodily desires and be happy" [IDI, schoolgirl, 16 years].

Schoolgirls also described experiencing touching on their private parts outside school. This was common in public transport and on markets. When they experienced this, many did not fight back but considered it a normal aspect of daily life. They also expressed fear of being shamed or physical violence from men if they reacted harshly to the touching. Hence most reported that they just decided to remain quiet. A girl described her experience in public place as follows:

To be honest, this happened to me in town. I was sent to the market, and I had not even started buying. I was still standing when one of those boys who sell shopping bags came behind me and started touching me in my private part... I turned and looked at him, but I

did not say a word. I was just forced to assume maybe that's his habit and I can't stop him. "If he can do that to me a stranger, how many other girls has he touched?". He later just left. I was just forced to leave him. "You can start arguing with him then you are beaten. I am still young who will defend me?". [FGD, Schoolgirls, ages 16-18 years]

A second girl described her experience of touching from total stranger on her way back from school:

I was in my school uniform with my school bag when I boarded the bus. This man was already in. He started touching me. Now, I removed his hands. When I turned and looked at him...I found that he was a grown-up man. I just decided to keep quiet and alight from that bus.[IDI, schoolgirl, 18 years]

When asked for their views on boys sexually harassing girls at school, boys reported that they perceived the casual touching of girls without an intention to hurt them as a normal way of displaying sexual interest and that they were attracted to them. Boys hoped that by persistently touching girls they could eventually get them to yield to the pressure of having sex with them.

By touching the girl, his aim is that he wants to show the girl that he likes/loves her...so if she does not accept him, he keeps touching her daily until she agrees. [FGD, schoolboys, 16-19 years]

Schoolboys were motivated to harass girls to practice what they had witnessed in the media. They described watching television and pornography as reinforcing the belief that harassing girls is a way to convince them into having sex:

Most men learn from these pornographic movies...After they watch them, they learn that to get girls to agree to have sex, they should arouse them by touching them in certain places. [IDI, schoolboy, 18 years]

Only few cases of boys reporting experiences of sexual harassment emerged, and they were mainly outside the school setting and in cases where the boy was not interested in a girl who forced a sexual relationship on him.

Male motivations underlying sexual harassment of schoolgirls

Male self-esteem appears to be a key driver for male sexual harassment of girls. Schoolboys reported that touching girls or passing sexual comments enhanced their feeling of masculinity, self-satisfaction, and prestige among peers:

“It gives you a feeling of pride when you touch her” [IDI, schoolboy, 19 years]

If they passed by schoolgirls while with their peers, they would appear to ‘show off’ that they are daring enough to approach them.

For some, it is a form of self-pride... He feels nice touching her. But the girl feels bad being touched without wanting Boys do this a lot on the way back home from school when walking in groups. He feels proud among his peers. He says, “you see I have touched her”. You know it is hard for some men to just touch a woman [IDI, schoolboy, 18 years]

Girls were also aware of this feeling of masculinity and boys' desire to show off to their peers and how a girl resisting publicly sometimes resulted in embarrassment of the man. A schoolgirl described her experience in the following:

He just passed, held my hand. He was also trying to scratch inside my hand... I told him to stop holding my hand and pushed him away....He got angry with me and hated me because he felt embarrassed ...he felt that I had belittled him Infront of his peers IDI schoolgirl]

Older boys in their last year of school seemed more confident to harass younger girls and were often cited as key perpetrators. One girl said:

To be honest, those form four boys when they find you seated, they like touching you here on the thighs...They pretend as if they are greeting you and touch you[IDI, schoolgirl, 18 years]

Male teachers appeared to use their position of power to harass schoolgirls and were sometimes in competition with schoolboys to enter relationships with schoolgirls. To avoid corporal punishment, schoolgirls talked about giving in to the advances of male teachers.

The male teachers normally approach girls here at school and seduce them. They follow up on you and if you refuse them, you are punished...because you have refused him...Now because of that, some girls just decide to agree since they don't see the need to keep suffering with those punishments. [IDI, schoolgirl, 18 years]

Victim blaming was common in the participants' accounts with boys reporting that girls lured them into touching them. Boys blamed girls' physical appearance and developing bodies as a justification to harass them as they attracted their attention:

It is the girls whose bodies look big... whose breasts and buttocks are big...I once saw a teacher calling out a student and telling her "Girl you look good and attractive and have increased in size", and then he touched her buttocks. [IDI, schoolboy, 18 years]

Girls borrowing money or any school items from boys and not returning was another driver of girl sexual harassment. Boys mentioned that girls are sexually harassed at school if they do not repay money that was owed to them.

A certain girl owed a guy about two thousand Tanzanian shillings [US\$1). She was dodging to pay every time he asked for it. One day the guy found her bending and he put his finger inside her behind. [IDI, schoolboy, 17 years]

Negative consequences of sexual harassment on schoolgirls

Both male and female students were aware of the detrimental effects of sexual harassment on girls and gave examples of these as psychological stress, shame/embarrassment, crying and reduced concentration in class, that ultimately affects schoolgirls' academic performance. Girls reported that they were often threatened by boys and male teachers for not accepting their sexual advances. Such girls lived in constant fear of shame and physical violence.

That man called me 'hey you, come here' I refused, and he said to me, "go away, you prostitute". I just left without turning around because I feared that he would beat me [IDI, schoolgirl, 17 years]

Physical violence was common among girls who reported sexual harassment. Reasons for physical violence varied from resisting harassment itself to engagement in acts that resulted in sexual harassment. For example, girls who engaged in transactional sex reported experiencing sexual harassment especially if they did not cooperate with the giver. Such girls were sometimes beaten and shamed in public for receiving materials and favours from men and refusing to engage in sex with them. A 17-year-old school described her experience in the following:

There is a boy who was bothering me, he was seducing me. So, after he approached me, I decided to teach him a lesson by demanding for money. I told him if he needs me, he should give me twenty-seven thousand shillings (\$12) for fabrics, fifteen thousand for shoes and clothes(\$7). "It is only after doing that that you will get me" ...When he gave me those things, I received and when he came looking for me, I told him I was not interested in him. He decided to beat me... [IDI, schoolgirl, 17 years]

However, instead of receiving peer support from fellow girls at school, girls reported that their peers stigmatised, laughed and made fun of them when they were harassed by boys and or men. This resulted to some girls dropping out of school to avoid shame and humiliation. Reflecting on the detrimental effects sexual harassment, girls described their peer who dropped out of school in the following:

There is a girl who dropped out of school completely due to that experience [harassment]. She decided to leave school completely because of humiliation from her fellow students as

they were pointing figures at her wherever she passed. She was uncomfortable at school.
[FGD, schoolgirls, 16-18 years]

Interestingly, although male students understood the negative consequences of sexual harassment on schoolgirls, that did not stop them from harassing them. For those that were sympathetic to girls, they cited effects of sexual harassment on girls' education:

Those boys disturb girls in their studies. The girls are constantly worried and cannot succeed in their studies...They [boys] like touching girls' buttocks and breasts or their private parts even though many girls don't like to be touched or humiliated in front of their fellow girls. [FGD, schoolboys, 15-18 years]

Further reflecting on the distress boys caused girls, a male student reported

I have witnessed here at school; boys just touch girls anyhow...Now you find that the girl is against it, and she starts crying. [IDI, schoolboy, 17 years]

Male students believed that schoolgirls had normalised their experiences of sexual harassment and many downplayed their experiences. Schoolgirls were careful about how they handled these incidences and opted not to report some perpetrators for fear of further harassment as reporting might exacerbate their situation. A schoolgirl narrated her experience of sexual harassment from a male teacher and opting not to report the incidence to school authorities despite receiving corporal punishment:

*He came and told me that he wants me and would like to see me later.... I was shocked,
"A teacher? You want me sexually, yet am a student? ... Have you ever thought that this*

thing will one day come to affect me in my studies? ...”. He didn’t answer anything, and he left. He came for the second time, and I told him that I wasn’t ready still. So, he punished me. I felt bad, but I didn’t tell anyone, not even my own parents. I didn’t want them to know. [FGD, schoolgirls, 16-19 years]

Instead of reporting their uncomfortable experiences to school authorities or family members, many girls devised strategies, such as staying late at school to avoid contact with their harassers even though this affected their daily routines:

There was this guy at school who was part of a group of hooligans. He wanted me, while I was not interested. So, he told me to watch out. He would sit outside the school gate and wait for me. I had to stay longer at school so that he could leave first. He could send my friends to tell me that if I continue rejecting him, he will beat me. [IDI, schoolgirl, 18 years]

As a further measure, some sexually harassed girls resorted to hiding their developing bodies and being self-conscious as the male teachers blamed them of enticing them:

When the male teachers come to class, they say that we are exposing our breasts for them to see. But when you hide your bust area by covering it with a pullover, they [teachers] again ask you “What you are hiding?”. [FGD, schoolgirls, 16-18 years]

The way girls handled harassers sometimes varied by the setting for the incidence and the type of harasser. Out of a feeling of shame and embarrassment for being touched in public, while most girls choose to remain silent, some openly resisted the act attracting the sympathy of others

around them. Girls who expressed disapproval for being touched in public were protected as the men were publicly rebuked for their actions:

Now I was in the vehicle and a man touched me. It happened that my neighbor was also in that vehicle. I was very much ashamed, and I started shouting at him [harasser] and everyone in the vehicle started quarreling him until he decided to alight from the vehicle ...They told him, “This one is a student, don’t you meet prostitutes in town to touch? Why have you reached a point of seducing a student? You adult men have diseases, and you now want to spread to children. This girl is like your own daughter” ...People in that vehicle were really harsh on him. [IDI, schoolgirl, 18 years]

Discussion

There is an expectation that schools are a safe and supporting environment for children and young people where in order to thrive all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Yet, our study found that schoolgirls experiences of sexual harassment not only posed a threat to their physical and psychological well-being, but also undermined their educational prospects. Sexual harassment described in our study comprised verbal and non-verbal gestures of a sexual nature, such as sexual jokes, lewd comments as well as sexual gestures using fingers, staring and girls receiving or being shown content of a sexual nature.

Male students and male teachers emerged as the main perpetrators of sexual harassment of schoolgirls. While masculinity was a key driver for male students sexually harassing female students, gendered power could explain male teachers’ sexual harassment of female students. Schoolboys wanted to prove to their peers that they were “real men” while male teachers abused

their position of power when they took advantage of female students. Similar drivers of sexual harassment were observed in South Africa (Jewkes et al., 2015; Prinsloo, 2006; Ward et al., 2018). We argue that girls' sexual harassment was exacerbated by persistent gender inequalities and differential socialisation of males that raise boys into a form of masculinity that condones and even encourages this behaviour (Heilman & Barker, 2018; Howard-Merrill et al., 2020; Jewkes et al., 2015).

The gender and sex differences were grounds for abuse of girls. Male students and teachers sexually harassed schoolgirls because of girls' physical appearance and their desire to start a sexual relationship with them. Hegemonic masculinity also became apparent in victim blaming as an explanation for sexual harassment, attributing the behaviour to schoolgirls' looks and developing bodies that lure men to touching their breasts and buttocks (Mamaru et al., 2015). Male teachers and students took advantage of the girls' developing bodies to harass them verbally and physically resulting to negative consequences on girls.

Transactional sex perpetuated sexual harassment with girls who asked and received material items from men likely experience it. Transactional relationships have been associated with coercion and intimate partner violence among adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa (Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, & Shai, 2012; Wamoyi et al., 2019; Wamoyi, Stobeanau, Bobrova, Abramsky, & Watts, 2016) and needs addressing through appropriate interventions that address adolescent girls economic vulnerability.

In pursuit of their education, schoolgirls were compelled to find ways of coping with the daily experience of sexual harassment in the community and within the school environment. This involved normalising their experiences and not sharing them with adults or peers who could intervene. Schoolgirls also tried avoiding perpetrators whenever possible and thus hindering their own freedom and functioning at school. Additionally, they engaged in sexual relationships with the perpetrator, hoping to end the harassment, exposing them to potentially more harassment later on, as well as STIs, HIV and unplanned pregnancies (Grose et al., 2021; Wamoyi et al., 2016), thus further curtailing their future goals. Furthermore, sexual harassment had adverse psychological effects on schoolgirls. Our findings on girls' experiences of anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, and constant worry while at school and the consequence of this on their mental health and academic performance are similar to those observed in other research (Hall & Hall, 2011; Mamaru et al., 2015). These findings are in line with what has been reported elsewhere about sexual harassment of schoolgirls as leading to increased absenteeism and eventual drop-out from school as a measure taken by girls to avoid their harassers (Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Jaffe, 2009; Mamaru et al., 2015).

This study has some limitations. Students were interviewed in the school settings, which may have resulted in under-reporting of their experiences of sexual harassment for fear of punishment from the teachers. This was minimized by reassuring all participants about the confidential nature of the study. Also, given that we did not interview teachers and school management about sexual harassment in school settings, it is likely that we have a one-sided view of sexual harassment in schools. Still, this study is an important contribution to the understanding of sexual harassment in

schools in Tanzania, with implications for addressing this practice in other sub-Saharan Africa settings.

Our findings highlight the need for interventions at the family, community, and school level to make boys aware of sexually harassing behaviours they may engage in and the consequence of such behaviour on adolescent girls. This could involve social norm programmes that help young men reflect and change their views about manhood, addresses gender norms and invests in helping young men find alternative ways of expressing masculinity and proving their relevance in the presence of the opposite sex and among their peers. This includes appropriate education of boys on girls' changing bodies and the need for respect and consideration. Such interventions should start early by engaging youth in a critical reflection and discussion about respect and gender equality through in-school and out-of-school programmes (Austrian et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2006). Ideally, those programmes would start early in childhood when boys and girls are socialized into specific gender roles.

In addition, to improve the situation in schools, the school management and governing bodies need to make a concerted effort to stop any form of sexual harassment in schools. Such efforts may involve: a) clear and comprehensive sexual harassment protocols for schools that stipulate the roles and responsibilities of teachers, outlining a safe and confidential reporting process and providing disciplinary guidance for coordinated and effective responses; b) developing a school environment in which values and human rights are protected, promoted and fulfilled; c) generating awareness of the different forms of sexual harassment through regular workshops on this; d) developing a standard of conduct among gender groups; e) creating a climate of trust in

which stereotyping is avoided; and f) addressing gender norms that reinforce hegemonic masculinity among males including teachers (Darj, Wijewardena, Lindmark, & Axemo, 2017; Verma et al., 2006).

Conclusion

In our study, sexual harassment was a pervasive phenomenon in schools that is highly linked to positions of power and the intersection with masculine entitlement. These preconditions provide the means for schoolboys and male teachers to sexually harass schoolgirls with perceived impunity. Sexual harassment has adverse consequences on girls' health and wellbeing and needs to be urgently addressed with appropriate interventions that address social norms around masculinity in early childhood and in the community, combined with clear school policies with zero tolerance for sexually harassing behaviour.

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