

Conceptualisation of sexual harassment in Northwestern Tanzania: The role of consent, male power and social norms

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Background



- The #MeToo and Time's Up movement raised global awareness of sexual harassment.
- Sexual harassment has detrimental social and health consequences.
- Limited attention to sexual harassment in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).
- Women from LMICs need to inform the conceptualisation of sexual harassment.

What is sexual harassment?

‘Any **unwelcome** sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence, humiliation or intimidation to the person’ (WHO, 2011)

Includes: Physical, verbal and non-verbal gestures of a sexual nature



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 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 analyzed 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 regard to sexual harassment. Sexual

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Sexual harassment in Tanzania

- High prevalence of non-partner sexual violence at >30%.
- Workplace study on sexual harassment in Mwanza showed sexual harassment ranges from 21% among women; 12% among men. (Vuckovic et al. 2017)
- The Tanzania National Plan of Action to end violence against women and Children 2017/2018 -2021/2022.
 - need to end sexual harassment in the workplace & to end all forms of sexual abuse.
- The way men and women understand sexual harassment is varied (Wamoyi et al. 2021)

Aim and Rationale

Aim

To explore **how** different population groups understood, conceptualised, and experienced sexual harassment and to explore community norms and perceptions around sexual harassment in Tanzania

Rationale

- Lack of clarity on how sexual harassment is conceptualised in LMICs
- Context-specific conceptualisations of sexual harassment are vital to:
 - develop effective measurement tools
 - estimate its magnitude
 - develop interventions

Methods

- Fieldwork was conducted in Mwanza city, Tanzania.
- Qualitative research design:
 - 74 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 13 focus group discussions (FGDs)
 - Participants from educational, workplace and public settings
 - IDIs focused on personal experiences of sexual harassment
 - FGDs focused on the general perceptions (normative view)
- Study participants:
 - Adult men & women aged 25-29 years in workplace and public spaces
 - In and out of school adolescent girls and boys aged 14-24 years
 - Participants from educational settings were recruited from public secondary schools

Findings

- Perceptions varied from lewd jokes to rape
- Key defining features of sexual harassment were:
 - The role of consent
 - Expression of male power
 - Social norms around acceptable sexual contact



Participants' perceptions of sexual harassment

- Conflation of sexual harassment with sexual violence ---- men/boys describe it as rape or forced sex

*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]

- Even though men described sexual harassment as extreme acts, such as rape, there was recognition that other forms of sexual harassment were equally uncomfortable to women

*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]

- Women & girls considered sexual harassment as the non-verbal gestures e.g. staring, winking, signals of a sexual nature that cause discomfort

Role of consent in conceptualising sexual harassment

- Consent was key in differentiating between acts that were considered harassment or not.

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]

- Dyadic relationship perceived as vital in differentiating acts of a sexual nature that were acceptable versus those that were not, even among men.

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....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]

Sexual harassment as an expression of male power

- Women appear to be targets while men, the perpetrators.
- Salient theme in schools & workplaces.
- Men in positions of power and possession of material resources perceived to use it to their advantage

*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 gendered power inequalities as perpetuating sexual harassment

*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 because those who work there were already used to it [touching].
[IDI, 32-year-old woman, workplace]*

Social norms on acceptable sexual contact

- Sexual harassment was differentiated from acceptable seduction or courtship practices by:
 - Nature of perpetrator (e.g., stranger vs familiar person)
 - Place where the act took place (e.g., public versus private)
 - Motivations behind the acts
- Further, *the reaction of the woman/girl immediately after the act* was key in determining whether the community considered to be a sexual harassment incident:

You would find that someone is being touched by a stranger inappropriately...like the way we see in crowded places ...if she continues as if nothing has happened, 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 she keeps quiet...she has to react by insulting the person who touched her [IDI, 22-year-old young woman, public place]

Key takeaways

- Sexual harassment occurs in schools, public places and workplaces in Tanzania
- Sexual harassment is a fluid concept whose definitions depend on several contextual factors.
- Consent and gendered power are fundamental in differentiating sexual harassment with other acts.
 - Need for consensus on the acts that constitute sexual harassment to be able to measure it
- Given that consent (or lack of) and power imbalances are fundamental to why sexual harassment occurs, it should be reflected in measurement tools.

Thank you!

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