

Reviewer's report

Title:Community perceptions of rape and child sexual abuse: a qualitative study in rural Tanzania

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Reviewer:Daniel Edward Wight

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General points

This paper addresses an extremely important topic and provides further evidence to explain why it is so challenging to combat rape and child sexual abuse in rural Tanzania. In particular, the findings on the extent to which these acts are legitimated, the reasons why they are not reported, and the unintended consequences when they are reported are very valuable. However, there are several serious limitations to the paper which I think need to be addressed before it is published.

Major compulsory revisions

The literature review should be improved. In summarising the existing literature the authors switch between present and past tense so it is unclear if they are describing current Tanzania or past practices. They are not sufficiently ethnic-specific. For instance, not all ethnic groups have traditions of 'jando' and 'unyago' (p.5). The review of ethnographic literature on 'enshrined cultural factors' in rural Tanzania affecting rape and child abuse should be more thorough. For instance there is now considerable literature on young people's sexual relationships, transactional sex, sexual respectability and the changing status of unmarried women, all of which seem important contextual factors for this study. It is odd that the institution of bridewealth is never mentioned, yet this is one of the underlying factors shaping husbands' sense of sexual (and other) rights over their wives. I have not done a recent literature search, but relevant papers/chapters I am aware of which are not cited include:

Haram, L. 2004. 'Prostitutes' or modern women? Negotiating respectability in northern Tanzania. In *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, ed. S. Arnfred, 211-29. Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Haram, L. 1995. Negotiating sexuality in times of economic want: The young and modern Meru women. In *Young people at risk: Fighting AIDS in northern Tanzania*, ed. K. I. Klepp, P. M. Biswalo, and A. Talle, 31-48. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Plummer, M. and Wight, D. 2011. *Young People's Lives and Sexual Relationships in Rural Africa: Findings from a large qualitative study in Tanzania*. Lexington Books: Lanham. Especially Chapter 7: 'Sexual negotiation, exchange and coercion'.

Setel, PW. 1999b. A plague of paradoxes: AIDS, culture and demography in northern Tanzania. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wamoyi, JM., Wight, D, Plummer, M, Mshana, GM, and Ross, D. 2010. Transactional sex amongst young people in rural northern Tanzania: An ethnography of young women's motivations and negotiation. *Reproductive Health* 7:2.

There is a good description of the study setting, providing useful context for the main findings. However, I think it is necessary to clarify the main ethnic group(s) in the area (are the Kilombero an ethnic group?) and, given the topic of the paper, the main features of family life, e.g. whether patrilineal or matrilineal, patri- or matrilocal, whether polygyny is widespread, how large families are, the status of unmarried mothers, and whether fathers generally live with their partners and children.

Although useful details are provided, the section on Methods needs to be revised in important ways. The rationale for sampling needs greater explanation. Why devote 2/5 groups to religious leaders and only one to 'community members' who presumably constitute the majority of the population? The rationale for mixed sex groups is rather weak; it seems that only one study is cited to demonstrate that this works well. The obvious limitations of mixed-sex groups are not discussed which is odd given the topic. A critical factor shaping interactions in group discussions, and the kind of data they generate, is whether the participants know each other or are strangers. This should be clarified.

The authors note that this is a sensitive topic yet they at no point acknowledge the limitations of group discussions as a method. Group discussions are unlikely to allow the expression of viewpoints that counter dominant public norms, or at least the consensus within the group, and so they are often complemented by individual interviews. This issue should be discussed.

The findings are presented in a very general way as if nearly all participants from all the groups had the same opinions. This seems most unlikely. It is important to clarify whether there were variations in perceptions and what the patterns were, e.g. by sex, age, occupation, religious status, etc.. For instance one would expect that women and men would have different views about the culpability of men, and the older generation would have different views from younger people about the factors encouraging rape. It seems highly unlikely that all participants were equally knowledgeable about the possible health consequences of rape (p.12). When an individual is cited as having a contrary view (e.g. bottom p.13) we are not told anything about them, even their sex. Related to this, in the Findings section it would be helpful if the kind of participants in the group discussions was stated after each quote, so that the reader does not have to refer to Table 1.

It would be helpful to use the term 'rape' consistently, and to clarify how it is being used. Sometimes it is used to refer to acts deemed rape under Tanzanian law, but most of the time it is used in the Euro-American sense of any forced sex.

p.13, top. The finding that rape of a child by a known person was considered acceptable is extremely important. However, no evidence is given to support it, and there is no discussion of how widespread this view is. The quote that is presumably meant to demonstrate this finding does not do so. It simply says that such practices must be hidden.

p.23, middle. The authors state that ‘...there are no clear pathways on how best to tackle these strongly ingrained attitudes.’ This is an extremely important issue and the point should be developed. There are now numerous programmes that attempt to tackle gender norms and modify gender inequalities at different levels: the authors might use existing systematic reviews to identify those that have the best evidence of effectiveness.

Punctuation and wording needs checking throughout by someone expert in the English language.

Minor Essential Revisions

Abstract, 2nd sentence: Needs commas to make meaning clear.

Abstract, 3rd and 4th sentences: The distinction between aims and objectives is not very clear. Might be helpful to cut reference to aims and simply detail the objectives more clearly, i.e. separating them out. At present some ambiguity in wording.

Abstract: Methods. This should clarify number of group discussions and whether they were single sex or mixed sex.

Abstract: Results. For qualitative study ‘Findings’ is more appropriate than ‘Results’ (which suggest the outcome of a calculation). The opening sentence: ‘The participants conveyed awareness of the magnitude of rape...’ implies that the true incidence of rape is known. Surely this is not the case? Subsequent wording in terms of perceptions is more appropriate.

p.4 line 2: Link between statement of first sentence and second sentence (‘This is because..’) seems unfounded. If anything, deeply enshrined cultural factors might make international recognition less likely.

p.4, last para. Important to clarify what the measure is of physical or sexual violence. Is it that 44% have ever experienced such violence?

‘Of these, 39% of women...’ It is not clear whether this is 39% of the 44% or 39% of the total sample. Presumably the latter?

p.5, top. The categorisation of reasons seems odd. The ‘family or community’ reasons seem fairly personal.

p.5, lower para. ‘These traditions and practice illustrate....’ Need to be clearer about why all the aforementioned practices are based on patriarchy.

p.5, top: Not clear what ‘at the crossroads’ refers to. If a useful metaphor should be clear what the different routes might be.

p.7, bottom: Sentence starting ‘Contextualized strengths and gaps...’ is rather muddled and could be better worded.

p.8, bottom. 'farmers would usually move away from their family...' Given the topic of paper need to clarify whether the farmers are always men.

p. 8 Table 2: From the brief extract it is not justified to say that rape cases are increasing ('Category' column).

p.12 'Findings' would be more appropriate than 'Results' since this is a qualitative study.

p.12 Table 3: These are not 'categories of perceptions' they are the perceptions themselves, albeit generalised from many participants.

p.12, 2nd para: The wording 'The informants acknowledged that...' implies that the researchers presented the informants with particular information and the informants agreed it was correct. Was this perception articulated by the informants without prompting?

p.14, bottom. It is not clear what '...such teachings are conducted by women in the home setting publicly through live demonstrations of sexual activity...' means. Presumably it does not mean that the women practised (lesbian?) sex in front of each other?

p.18, line 5. Should be 'wide' not 'wider'.

p.25, 2nd para. The statement of difference between rural and urban areas seems poorly founded. It seems highly likely that the most common perpetrators of rape in both areas are husbands raping their wives. If this statement is to be retained it needs strong empirical evidence to support it, ideally going beyond reported perceptions.

p.25, bottom. The heading 'Trustworthiness' would be better expressed as 'Validity of findings'.

p.26, top. Could authors clarify length of 'Prolonged engagement' otherwise fairly meaningless.

Discretionary Revisions

The paper covers both child sexual abuse and the rape of adults. In the findings and discussion the two are generally conflated. Are there not important issues that are specific to one or the other that require exploration, such as the deferential status of children in Tanzanian society?

The discussion of the findings in relation to Connell's theorisation does not acknowledge that men's control over women (as daughters or as wives) can lead men to have an interest in seeking redress from perpetrators, not just women. Thus poverty might prevent a man from seeking justice in the case of his child or wife being raped.

Level of interest:An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English:Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review:No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.