

Religious institutions' strategies to mitigate sexual violence against adolescent girls in pastoralist communities, Manyara, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the strategies employed by religious institutions to redress sexual violence against adolescent girls in pastoralist communities of the Manyara region, Tanzania, using institutional theory as a theoretical framework. A descriptive mixed-method research design was adopted. The study targeted household heads and employed purposive and systematic sampling techniques. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to 240 respondents, 48 key informant interviews, and eight focus group discussions (FGDs). Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, while quantitative data were subjected to inferential statistics analysis. Findings reveal that religious institutions employ a multifaceted approach, including awareness seminars, open-air meetings, advocacy, counseling, entrepreneurship programs, and preaching to influence pastoralist communities. The study recommends that religious institutions intensify their advocacy efforts to influence policymakers to revise and enforce policies and laws that protect children's rights, particularly those concerning marital status. Furthermore, religious institutions should strengthen policy implementation, allocate additional resources, and foster collaborative programs to effectively combat sexual violence against adolescent girls in the Manyara region.

Keywords: Adolescent Girls, Advocacy, Pastoral communities, Religious Institutions, Sexual Violence

I. INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is defined as any sexual act performed without the explicit consent of all parties involved (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2020a; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2021). This pervasive issue is a global challenge, transcending boundaries of religion, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and level of educational attainment (Kisanga, 2012; Decker et al., 2014; Parsitau & Aura, 2020). While sexual violence impacts individuals from different groups of people, adolescent girls are disproportionately affected, with approximately 40% experiencing at least one act of sexual violence during their lifetime. (Borumandnia et al., 2020; United Nations International Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022). The prevalence rates of sexual violence against adolescent girls however, varies significantly by country

In the United States, 11.1% of adolescent girls are affected (Ellsberg et al., 2017), while rates are higher in Switzerland at 22% (Margit et al., 2012) and in Norway at 17.2% (Wessells & Kostelny, 2021). The United Kingdom reports a rate of 10% (Karsna & Bromley, 2023). In Africa, the issue is equally pronounced, with 25% of adolescent girls in Nigeria (Brown et al., 2022), 14.6% in South Africa (Dervis & Meinck, 2018), and 20% in Ghana experiencing sexual violence (UNICEF, 2022).

In Tanzania, the national prevalence of sexual violence against girls stands at 33.3% for girls aged 15 and older (URT, 2020a; Reuben et al., 2021). This national trend is further exacerbated in certain areas, such as Manyara region, which is home to many pastoral communities. Here, a confluence of harmful cultural practices and gender-based violence (GBV) creates a particularly acute environment for adolescent girls. Statistics from the region underscore this reality, revealing the interconnectedness of various forms of violence. Manyara has a high prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) at 43% (Adam & Charles, 2024), which is often a violent act and precursor to other forms of gender based violence. This is further compounded by a 29% rate of early pregnancies (URT, 2022b) and a 21.9% rate of early marriages (URT, 2024a). These metrics collectively illustrate the deeply entrenched nature

of GBV in the region. The high prevalence of these practices not only represents distinct forms of violence but also creates a cycle that severely impedes efforts to empower adolescent girls and ensure their rights and well-being.

Religious institutions, as influential community structures, are uniquely positioned to address these issues through multifaceted strategies aimed at transforming harmful norms and practices. This study investigates the strategies employed by religious institutions in the Manyara region to reduce sexual violence against adolescent girls, contributing to the global discourse on leveraging faith-based organizations to promote gender equity and social change.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Sexual violence against adolescent girls remains a critical issue globally and is particularly severe in Tanzania's Manyara region. Nationally, Tanzania reports 22% of the early pregnancy rate, with Manyara leading at 29%, followed by Njombe (26%) and Lindi (25%) (URT, 2022b). Regarding early marriage, the national rate is 29%, while in Manyara it is 21.9% (URT, 2024a). While the national FGM prevalence is 8%, Manyara and Arusha regions report a staggering 43% (Adam & Charles, 2024; URT, 2024b). Religious institutions, as faith-based organizations rooted in the principles of respect, integrity, and equality (Anshel & Smith, 2014; Aghbiji & Swart, 2015), have initiated efforts to combat sexual violence against adolescent girls in the region. However, the specific strategies employed by these institutions to address these issues remain unexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the approaches used by religious institutions to mitigate sexual violence against adolescent girls in Manyara pastoralist communities.

1.2 Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the strategies implemented by religious institutions to reduce sexual violence against adolescent girls in pastoralist communities of the Manyara region, Tanzania

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Institutional Theory

This study used the institutional theory, as proposed by Scott (2004) to examine how regulative, cognitive, and normative dimensions shape individual behaviour within social institutions (such as families, schools, or religious organizations). The regulative dimension encompasses institutional rules and regulations. The cognitive dimension reflects knowledge and skills, and the normative dimension pertains to values and norms. In the context of this study, institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how religious institutions can challenge harmful practices that perpetuate sexual violence against adolescent girls in pastoralist communities by leveraging their structural dimensions to influence behavioural change.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Global perspectives on Religious Institutions and Social Change

Religious institutions have been recognized globally as a powerful agent of social transformation. Anshel and Smith (2014) examined the role of religious leaders in promoting healthy behaviours in the United States, highlighting their potential to foster community change through sermons and congregational programs. Their findings suggest that clergy can serve as influential advocates for positive social practices, a model applicable to addressing sexual violence. Their findings revealed a unique role for a potential that was largely overlooked in applied health and consulting psychology. It was noted that by addressing social issues from the pulpit and through congregational programs, and by visibly embracing the principles of a healthier lifestyle, clergy could effectively advocate for healthy living. This suggests a promising path for religious institutions to become influential agents in promoting positive social change within their communities.

In the African context, Aghbiji and Swart (2015) underscored the centrality of religion in shaping moral and social transformation, emphasizing a critical and appreciative perspective. It showed that religion is a crucial component of the African way of life, as it contributes to moral, socio-political, and economic transformation. It was realized that all religious traditions uphold moral values, as reflected in the scriptures of various religions, such as Christianity and Islam, as well as in the oral traditions of African traditional religions. The study documented that religion's role in fostering moral values is essential for the development of sound social, economic, and democratic political systems. According to their findings, no other institution could compete with religious communities in driving community transformation. Furthermore, it was stated that, as community-based institutions with vibrant

networks, religious communities will continue to serve as unifying factors and catalysts for socio-political and economic development within the African continent. Gibbs and Ajulu (1999) further highlighted the role of churches in advocating for human rights, democracy, and poverty alleviation. Their findings demonstrated that churches provide churches providing essential social services and serve as vocal advocates against human rights abuses, social injustice, and positioning them as key contributors to civil society.

Fusheini et al (2024) examined the complex role of religion in addressing sexual and gender-based violence in Ghana's Metropolis. Their findings revealed that while religious traditions emphasize equality and non-violence, certain interpretations of religious texts and cultural practices perpetuate patriarchal norms that subjugate women. Nevertheless, religious institutions in Tamale have increasingly engaged in advocacy, education, counseling services, and partnerships with civil society groups to combat violence. These efforts include supporting survivors and challenging harmful norms, though challenges persist due to entrenched sociocultural practices and misinterpretation of religious texts. The study recommends enhanced collaboration between the government and religious institutions to promote gender equity and women's empowerment.

The global and regional evidence underscores the potential of religious institutions to address social issues, including sexual violence through community-based strategies. In Tanzania's Manyara region, where pastoralist communities face high rates of sexual violence, religious institutions are actively engaged in efforts to transform harmful norms and practices. However, the specific strategies employed in this context remain underexplored, necessitating a focused investigation into their approaches and effectiveness in reducing sexual violence against adolescent girls.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Area

This study was conducted in Hanang and Simanjiro districts in Manyara region, Tanzania. These districts were selected due to a high prevalence of sexual violence against adolescent girls in pastoral communities, including practices such as early marriages (URT, 2024b). Pastoralist populations in these areas, primarily from tribes that attach significant cultural value to cattle, have historically resisted formal education and modernization efforts (Daily Africa, 2020). These communities have low literacy rates and strong patriarchal structures. Moreover, the presence of active. Religious institutions engaged in combating sexual violence against adolescent girls in these districts made them suitable for this investigation.

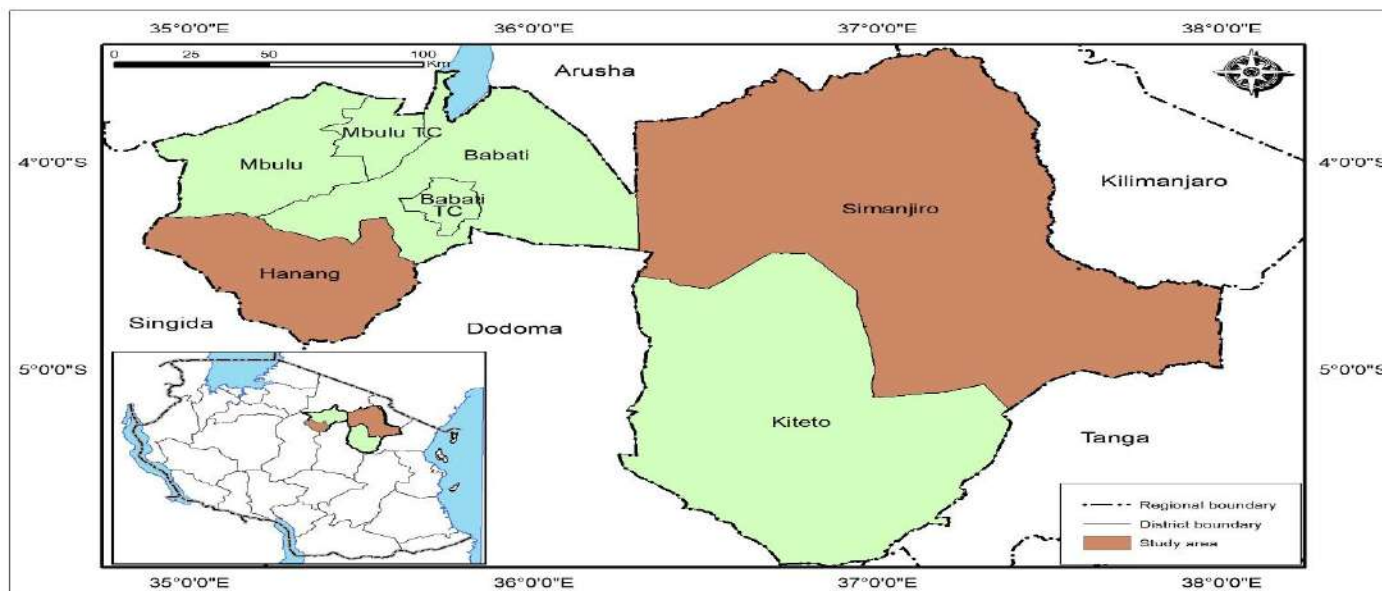


Figure 1
A Map of Manyara Region showing Hanang and Simanjiro Districts

3.2 Research Design

A descriptive research design was employed in this study to assess the extent of association between variables as well as attitudes and opinions of participants, in line with Creswell (2014). The design aimed to develop grounded concepts through in-depth descriptions of who, what, where, and how (McCombes, 2019). A mixed methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of strategies used by religious institutions to address sexual violence against adolescent girls.

3.3 Target population, Sampling and Sample Size

The target population in this study comprised household from pastoralist communities, who served as the primary unit of analysis for the household survey. Additionally, 48 key informants were included, such as the Regional Social Welfare Officer, District Social Welfare Officers, Village Executive Officers (VEOs), Child and Reproductive Health Officers, and Police Gender Desk Officials and religious leaders, serving the communities. Systematic sampling was utilized for the household survey to ensure representativeness, while purposive sampling was employed to select the key informants based on their expertise and relevance to the study. Participants for the eight focus group discussions (FGD) were purposefully selected from heads of households considered knowledgeable and understanding the problem. The sample size for the household survey was 240 respondents which was determined to achieve statistical representativeness and precision, enabling generalizability as recommended by Creswell (2014).

3.4 Data Collection Method

Data were collected through a combination of survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Structured questionnaires were administered to the 240 household heads to gather quantitative data, including responses on the strategies employed by religious institutions to combat sexual violence in their communities. In-depth interviews were conducted with the 48 key informants to elicit detailed qualitative insights, while eight FGDs with household heads provided additional qualitative data through group interactions.

3.5 Data Analysis

For quantitative data, IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 was used for processing and analyzing. The data were entered, edited, coded, cleaned, and crosschecked for consistency and completeness to minimize errors. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages were computed and presented in tables. Qualitative data from interviews and FGD were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were transcribed, coded, and organized into themes, which were then interpreted to generate meaningful insights. This dual approach ensured a robust integration of findings for the final report.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

This section elucidates the findings from a study investigating the strategies employed by religious institutions into address sexual violence against adolescent girls Hanang and Simanjiro districts of the Manyara region, Tanzania. Data were collected through household surveys (n=240), key informant interviews (n=48), and focus group discussions (FGD; n=8), utilizing a mixed-methods approach. The analysis, which is grounded in institutional theory (Scott, 2004), identifies five key strategies. Each and discusses their effectiveness in transforming harmful cultural practices within pastoralist communities. Each strategy is represented below, supported by quantitative and qualitative data, and contextualized within the broader literature

4.1.1 Awareness Creation Seminars and Open-Air Meetings

Awareness creation seminars and open-air meetings were a prominent strategy endorsed by 87.08% of the respondents (Hanang (80.83%) and Simanjiro (93.33%). These initiatives were effective. Disaggregation of data by study sites showed that more than half of the respondents in both Hanang targeted diverse community groups, including elderly men and women who hold cultural authority and youth, to challenge norms perpetuating sexual violence. Qualitative insights underscored their inclusivity. "They conduct seminars and all people are being educated without segregation based on religion, age, economic status. They use the Holy Scriptures to teach or during Islamic prayers on Friday; "Religious institutions are at the forefront of fighting sexual violence against girls" (FGD1, participant N2). A key informant added, "In my church, I conduct seminars to all adults and sometimes couples only. They are trained on sexual violence and its effects, so church members are given awareness to be the light in the community' (KN4).

These findings align with institutional theory's cognitive dimension, which emphasizes knowledge dissemination to reshape behaviours (Scott, 2004), Vyas et al., (2018) note that interfaith collaborations reduce resistance to cultural transformation. Douglas (2024) highlights sensitization programs as critical for addressing gender-based violence. Abeid et al, 2015) and Pereira et al., (2020) further suggest that limited awareness exacerbate sexual violence, reinforcing the importance of education as preventive measures (Reuben et al, 2021).

4.2 Introduction of Guidance and Counselling Services for Youth

The study found that guidance and counseling services were supported by 84.17% of respondents (Hanang, 86.67%; Simanjiro, 81.67%), making a shift from traditional patriarchal counseling practices in pastoralist communities. These services provided spiritual and psychological support, fostering healing and community acceptance for survivors. Key informants noted, “Religious institutions provide counselling and guidance to the victims and survivors of sexual violence. This service has helped survivors to get the strength to continue with life and their life goals, also parents to accept them without prejudice” (KIN12). Another emphasized: “Counselling and guidance from religious institutions have been of great help to adolescent girls. Once they became victims, they normally lose focus because the community does not understand them” (KIN18). This strategy aligns with the normative dimension of institutional theory, promoting values of empathy and equality (Scott, 2004). Fusheini et al. (2024) and Moon and Shim (2010) highlight the role of religious leaders in restoring self-worth, while Le Roux & Pertek (2022) note the unique spiritual resources offered by faith-based counseling. (Nkechi et al., 2016) describe such interventions as therapeutic, supporting both victims and families in overcoming trauma.

4.3 Provision of advocacy service

The study found that advocacy services, reported by 42.92% of respondents (Hanang, 37.50%; Simanjiro, 48.33%), involved religious institutions advocating for the rights and dignity of adolescent girls. A key informant stated, “Religious Institutions provide advocacy services to promote awareness creation and to speak for those who cannot speak out. They use their power and respect in the community to speak for vulnerable groups” (KIN10). However, challenges were noted: “Effects in the community as expected. Most of the aged leaders do not speak much about violence; maybe the young generation can do better if well prepared” (KIN 14). FGD participants echoed persistent cultural issues: “Rape is a problem. However, according to our traditions, the main concern is not the sexual violence itself, but rather the issue of teenage pregnancy.” (FGD) participant. This implies that within their cultural traditions, pregnancy is viewed as a more significant problem than the act of rape that led to it. From an institutional theory perspective, advocacy serves as a regulative tool to enforce equitable norms (Scott, 2004). The World Bank (2022) and Interfaith Dialogue in Tanzania (2016) emphasize the role of advocacy in influencing policy and promoting social justice (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2022). The lower response rate below 50% suggests a need for intensified efforts to leverage religious institutions moral authority

4.4 Introduction of Entrepreneurship Training Programs

The study found that training programs were the most endorsed strategy, with 97.50% agreement Hanang: 98.33% Simanjiro: 96.67%. These programs equipped adolescent girls, particularly survivors, with skills for economic independence, reducing vulnerability to exploitation. By fostering wealth creation, they challenged dependency on coercive relationships. This aligns with institutional theory’s cognitive dimension, enhancing skills to transform gender roles (Scott, 2004). Mukuka (2023) and Nyanto (2024) support this, noting that empowerment through skills building promotes gendered transformation and reduces the risks of sexual violence.

4.5 Teaching the Word of God

The study revealed that teaching the word of God, as reported by 82.92% of respondents, was emphasized in Hanang (80.83%) and Simanjiro (85.0%), with a focus on faith-based teaching to foster respect and human rights. A key informant stated, “We teach the word of God through Christian education in Schools, focusing on those who need to understand Christian faith and social matters such as sexual violence” (KIN7). An FGD participant noted: “The word of God is changing minds. It could not be possible for you as a woman to sit with us and discuss issues. This strategy helps a lot, considering that it is faith-based” (FGD2, participant N4). This strategy targets the normative dimension of institutional theory, reinterpreting sacred texts to promote equality (Scott, 2004). Maratu (2025) and Parsitau and Aura (2020) affirm preaching as a catalyst for attitude change, while Schaefer (2006) and Fortune and Enger (2006) highlight religious texts as resources for healing. Interfaith dialogue in Tanzania (2016) underscores their role in reshaping beliefs. The summary of strategies is shown in Table 1

Table 1

Strategies by Religious Institution to combat Sexual Violence against Adolescent Girls

SN	Strategy	Hanang (n=120)		Simanjiro (n=120)		Total (n=240)	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
1	Awareness creation seminars and open-air meetings	97	80.83	112	93.33	209	87.08
2	Introduction of guidance and counselling services for youth	104	86.67	98	81.67	202	84.17
3	Provision of advocacy services	45	37.50	58	48.33	103	42.92
4	Introduction of entrepreneurship training programs	118	98.33	116	96.67	234	97.50
5	Teaching the word of God	97	80.83	102	85.00	199	82.92

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The findings highlight the multifaceted roles of religious institutions in combating sexual violence, aligning with institutional theory's framework of regulative, cognitive, and normative change. Entrepreneurship training and awareness seminars demonstrate high community uptake, reflecting their effectiveness in addressing economic and cultural diversity of violence. Counselling services and teaching of the word of God further support psychological and moral transformation. However, advocacy services require enhanced efforts to overcome persistent cultural barriers, as indicated by lower endorsement and qualitative concerns about traditional attitudes. These strategies collectively challenge harmful norms, empower survivors, and promote gender equity, contributing to the global discourse on faith-based interventions for social change.

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