Social-cultural factors perpetuating child abuse in pastoralist community in Monduli District, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse remains a challenge in Tanzania, with pastoralist communities like those in Monduli District reporting alarmingly high rates. This problem is often perpetuated by deeply embedded socio-cultural norms that override formal child protection laws. This study assessed the specific social and cultural factors driving this abuse. This paper is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. The target population of the study was 3234 heads of households. A sample size of 356 heads of households was calculate. A total of 5 respondents were interviewed as key informants and 356 respondents filled the questionnaire. Data was analysed by using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings establish that abuse is deeply entrenched in social structures and systemic institutional weaknesses, rather than a knowledge deficit This is compounded by a perceived limited support from formal protection institutions mean of 3.19. child abuse revealed maximum vulnerability in trusted settings the home 30.5% and school 26.9%, confirming perpetrators are predominantly individuals in authority (family, teachers). The community overwhelmingly prioritized structural reforms for intervention, with 48.2% recommending strengthening local reporting mechanisms, while General Awareness Campaigns were deemed the lowest priority 3.6%. The study concludes that perception of community on child abuse is driven by the validation of traditional disciplinary norms within extended families and the absence of accessible, trusted formal protection systems. The study recommends that the Interventions away from broad awareness campaigns to strategically prioritize resources toward strengthening functional, local reporting, and enforcement systems, integrated with targeted economic support programs to mitigate poverty-related neglect.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Community Perception, Social Cultural Factors

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), nearly one billion children aged 2 to 17 globally have experienced some form of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as well as neglect. These violations have far-reaching effects on a child s development and mental well-being (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). Although child abuse is a worldwide issue, its manifestation is particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where cultural norms and limited institutional capacity hinder open discussion and adequate response (Maternowska *et al.*, 2018). Even in high-income countries such as Switzerland, studies reveal that 22% of girls and 8% of boys reported experiencing sexual abuse, demonstrating that this problem transcends economic contexts (Cerna-Turoff *et al.*, 2021). In low- and middle-income countries, the perception of pastoralist society in child abuse is high, with children frequently exposed to various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual harm, lack of right information on child rights and child protection procedures and level of awareness in child abuse. Child abuse is also a pressing issue in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in rural and impoverished communities. In Kenya, for instance, Wado *et al.*, (2022) revealed alarming rates of abuse in Nairobi's slums, with 13.3% of girls experiencing emotional abuse and 22% facing physical or sexual abuse. These statistics highlight the urgent need for effective interventions and support systems.

In Tanzania, the magnitude of the problem is similarly severe. A national survey by the Government of Tanzania in partnership with UNICEF and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that approximately three out of every four children (74.6%) had experienced physical abuse before the age of 18. Additionally, 27.9% of girls and 13.4% of boys reported experiencing sexual abuse, while 24.7% of girls and 28.8% of boys reported emotional abuse during childhood (UNICEF, 2011). These findings highlight the deeply rooted nature of child abuse in the country.

Data from report on National plan of action to end violence against women and children in Tanzania, (2024), shows that the total number of reported abuse cases increased by 16.92% between 2022 (1,507 cases) and 2024 (1,762 cases). A detailed analysis of the proportional distribution of abuse types reveals dynamic shifts over this period.

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While Physical Abuse consistently remained the dominant category, accounting for 51.96% in 2022 and rising to 53.24% in 2024, the year 2023 saw a important shift where Sexual Abuse increased significantly to represent 40.79% of the 1,591 total cases, signalling a growing prevalence of sexual offenses relative to other types that requires targeted intervention. This dramatic surge underscores that in pastoralist communities like Monduli, abuse against children is deeply rooted in traditional socio-cultural practices, which perpetuate harmful norms. Forms of abuse such as corporal punishment, early marriage, and gender-based abuse are frequently regarded as acceptable means of discipline and social control, particularly among ethnic groups like the Maasai F. The overwhelming concentration of reported cases in this predominantly pastoralist area, coupled with the alarming rate of increase.

Data from the Monduli District Council (2025) further highlight the specific forms of abuse prevalent in the study area. Of the 201 cases reported in 2023, Physical Abuse was the most frequent category at 78 cases (38.81%), involving 46 girls (22.89%) and 32 boys (15.92%). Emotional Abuse followed, accounting for 65 cases (32.34%), with 39 girls (19.40%) and 26 boys (12.94%). Sexual Abuse comprised 58 cases (28.86%), affecting 37 girls (18.41%) and 21 boys (10.45%). This distribution confirms that physical abuse is the primary threat in Monduli, but the high rates of emotional and sexual abuse necessitate a holistic approach to child protection (URT, 2024. While existing research has largely focused on institutional responses, urban policy implementation, and the role of non-governmental organizations, the complex socio-cultural drivers of child abuse in rural and pastoralist settings remain limited (Kidman et al. (2020), Percy-Smith et al. (2017)). This study seeks to address that gap by assessing how traditional beliefs, gender roles, and community power structures perpetuate abuse against children in pastoralist community specifically in Monduli District.

1.1 Research Questions

i. How do traditional beliefs among pastoralists contribute to the perpetuation of child abuse?
ii. What social structures contribute to child abuse in pastoralist communities?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, rooted in the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted factors that sustain child abuse within Tanzanian pastoralist communities, with a specific focus on Monduli District. The theory emphasizes the importance of examining the complex interactions between individuals and their surrounding environments ranging from immediate settings such as family and peers to broader cultural, social, and institutional contexts. The theory identifies five systems that shape individual outcomes: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem includes direct environments such as family, school, and peers. The mesosystem focuses on the linkages between these immediate settings. The ecosystem encompasses broader social structures that indirectly influence the child abuse, such as parental workplaces or local institutions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Crawford, 2020). The macrosystem consists of overarching cultural values, societal norms, and ideological constructs, while the chronosystem reflects the influence of historical shifts and life transitions over time (Crawford, 2020).

In the context of this study, the macrosystem is especially relevant for analysing how socio-cultural norms shape and legitimise child abuse in pastoralist communities of Tanzania. Practices such as early marriage, corporal punishment, and other forms of gender-based abuse are not only tolerated but often embedded within traditional worldviews (Crawford, 2020; Haviland *et al.*, 2013). These behaviours are frequently viewed as significance mechanisms for social control and the preservation of cultural identity. Ecological Systems Theory facilitates an important examination of how such traditions is transmitted through family structures, educational settings, and community expectations, thereby normalising and perpetuating various forms of child abuse across generations.

One of the strengths of this theory is its ability to offer a multi-layered analytical framework. It allows researchers to explore how individuals interact with their immediate environments while being simultaneously shaped by broader societal systems (Haviland *et al.*, 2013). Despite these strengths, the theory presents certain limitations. It does not provide direct predictions or causal pathways, making it less suited for hypothesis-driven research that requires measurable cause-and-effect relationships. Furthermore, its broad scope may sometimes overlook micro-level nuances or individual differences, especially in diverse or marginalised populations. Nevertheless, Ecological Systems Theory remains an appropriate foundation for this study. It enables a comprehensive understanding of how structural, cultural, and interpersonal influences intersect to shape norms around child abuse (UNICEF 2017).

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2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Pastoralists Traditional Beliefs on Child Abuse Perpetuation

Recent empirical studies (2018-2025) reveal that Tanzanian pastoralist communities maintain deeply rooted traditional beliefs that perpetuate various forms of abuse against children. Maasai pastoralists view corporal punishment as significance for child discipline, most of surveyed parents believing physical chastisement builds resilience and obedience Archambault, (2009). It was found that initiation rites are considered for boy's transition to manhood in pastoralist societies (UNESCO 2018). These beliefs are reinforced by community elders who maintain that traditional practices must be preserved despite contradicting national laws and international child rights conventions (Stark *et all*, 2016) The normalization of such violent practices creates intergenerational cycles of abuse, as children grow up perceiving abuse as an acceptable form of socialization.

Traditional beliefs a particularly significant role in sustaining abuse against girls in pastoralist communities. Studies by Woodhill *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that 65% of pastoralist families in northern Tanzania consider early marriage a protective measure against premarital pregnancy, while female genital mutilation (FGM) is viewed as a necessary rite of passage ensuring marriageability. Kimani s (2022) ethnographic research reveals that these practices are often justified through patriarchal interpretations of cultural identity, with community leaders framing them as defences against modernization s perceived threats. Furthermore, Plan International (2022) reports that pastoralist girls who resist these traditions frequently face ostracization or additional abuse; creating a climate of fear that perpetuates compliance. These findings highlight how traditional beliefs intertwine with gender norms to maintain harmful practices despite legal prohibitions and awareness campaigns (UNICEF, 2017).

Emerging research emphasizes the complex relationship between pastoralist livelihoods and traditional beliefs about child abuse. A 2023 study by the International Labour Organization found that economic pressures reinforce violent traditions, as families facing food insecurity are more likely to marry daughters early for bride wealth or engage children in hazardous labor. While government and NGO interventions have increased legal awareness, their impact remains limited by communities' deep trust in traditional governance systems. This evidence underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches that engage rather than alienate pastoralist communities in abuse prevention efforts (WHO, 2024).

2.2.2 Social Structure and its Contribution to Child Abuse

The contribution of social structure on child abuse has gained increasing attention in recent scholarship, as researchers seek to understand how societal systems shape the vulnerability of children. Social structure, comprising interconnected institutions such as the family, education, religion, and economic systems, provides the framework within which individuals interact and develop (Giddens *et al.*, 2017). Within this context, scholars argue that structural inequality particularly poverty, gender norms, and limited access to education creates an environment conducive to child abuse (Maternowska *et al.*, 2018). These structural factors are not merely background conditions but active contributors to cycles of abuse, especially in marginalized or traditionally structured societies. The embeddedness of children in hierarchical relationships, particularly in patriarchal or male-dominated communities, has also been cited as a condition that enables abuse to go unchallenged.

Contrary to views that emphasize individual pathology or family dysfunction as primary causes of abuse, contemporary sociological research stresses the need to analyze macro-level social systems. For instance, a study by Kalolo and Kapinga (2023) in East Africa demonstrated that deeply entrenched cultural norms and expectations regarding child discipline and obedience serve as legitimizing mechanisms for physical and emotional abuse. In Tanzanian pastoralist communities, communal social structures, including informal justice systems and clan hierarchies, often prioritize family reputation over child protection. These findings challenge universal models of child protection by highlighting the contextual nature of abuse and the limitations of interventions that do not consider socio-cultural dynamics.

Nevertheless, there is ongoing scholarly debate regarding the extent to which social structure can be transformed to prevent abuse. While some argue for structural reforms through legislation, education, and economic empowerment (UNICEF, 2021), others caution that such interventions must be culturally sensitive and community-led to be effective This aligns with the position that structural transformation is significance but must be informed by localized understandings of power, kinship, and community roles. As the literature suggests, addressing child abuse requires not only protective policies but an important examination of the social systems that shape beliefs and practices across generations.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

To comprehensively examine the socio-cultural factors perpetuating child abuse in pastoralist communities,

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the study adopted a mixed methods research approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative components within a cross-sectional design (Kothari, 2004), This approach enabled the researcher to explore not only the prevalence and distribution of key socio-cultural variables but also the deeper meanings, values, and contextual factors underlying these patterns. Quantitative data offered measurable evidence of the associations between specific socio-cultural factors such as gender roles, traditional beliefs, and family structures and the incidence of child abuse. On the other hand, qualitative insights helped to uncover the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences of community members, allowing for a deeper interpretation of the social and cultural norms that sustain harmful practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The integration of these two approaches enhanced the validity and richness of the findings by enabling the researcher to triangulate results.

3.2 Study Area

The study took place in Monduli Juu Ward, located in Monduli District within the Arusha Region of northern Tanzania. This district is primarily inhabited by pastoralist community, who maintain strong cultural ties to traditional practices and indigenous ways of life. In addition, the district is selected because it is reported to have highest number of child abuse cases, underscoring the urgent need to examine the socio-cultural dynamics contributing to such patterns (URT, 2024).

3.3 Sampling

This study employed a combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques to obtain a balanced and representative sample. Specifically, the simple random sampling method, a form of probability sampling, was used to select heads of households to ensure that everyone had an equal chance of being included. In addition, a purposive sampling technique classified under non-probability sampling was employed to select key informants who possess specific knowledge relevant to the study. These informants included the Ward Executive Officer, Community Development Officer, Ward Education Officer, Social Welfare Officer, and community elders. Purposive sampling was chosen to capture rich, detailed insights from individuals with extensive understanding of community norms, leadership structures, and child welfare dynamics. As argued by Palinkas *et al.*, (2015), purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative studies that aim to gain deep contextual understanding from knowledgeable participants. The combination of probability and non-probability sampling enhanced both the representativeness and depth of the study findings (the age of respondent was categorized)

3.4 Target Population and Sample Size

The study population involved head of household (which is 3234 head of households as per NBS 2022) in Monduli Juu ward. On the other hand, WEO, CDO, Ward Education Officer, Police Gender Desk Officer, Social Welfare Officer and Elders was served as key informants. The sample was drawn from these groups to ensure a diversity of community perception, capturing the complexity of cultural contribution on child-rearing practices and child abuse in Monduli District. This approach enables the study to explore how different members of the community view and experience cultural norms, as well as their readiness to embrace potential changes that could reduce child abuse. Sample size was determined using Yamane formula of 1967. As follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{3234}{1 + 3234(0.05)^2}$$

Thus, the sample size for this study was 356 heads of households

3.4 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to selected heads of households within the pastoralist community This method was considered efficient for collecting reliable data from household heads, who are typically responsible for decision-making and family welfare in the community (Kothari, 2004). Qualitative data were collected through key informant interviews with selected community leaders and officials, including the Ward Executive Officer, Ward Education Officer, Social Welfare Officer, and community elders. This method allowed for a rich, narrative understanding of how cultural practices and community structures contribute to child-rearing and perpetuate abuse in the pastoralist community.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis used descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) to summarize data. To address the first research question which focused was to respond on what are the common pastoralists' traditional beliefs on

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child abuse perpetuation. Data collected was analysed using Descriptive Statistics, specifically Mean Scores and their associated frequencies and percentages. The Mean Score for each traditional belief statement ("Questioning elders' treatment is disrespect") was calculated using a 5-point Likert scale, By comparing the calculated mean for each belief against the neutral mean, the study determined the community's normative position: a mean significantly below 3.0 indicated collective rejection of the belief, while a mean near or above 3.0 indicated ambivalence or collective acceptance.

The second question focused on social structures that contribute to child abuse within pastoralist community. Descriptive Statistics (Frequencies and Percentages) were used to summarize the prevalence and characteristics of key social structures within the community. This included analysing data on the roles of traditional councils, gender-specific responsibilities, economic activities (child labor and herding), and the function of formal protection agents (social workers). Qualitative data, obtained through semi-structured interviews with key informants including the Ward Executive Officer, Ward Education Officer, Social Welfare Officer, and community elders were analysed using Thematic Analysis.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

A fundamental ethical principle guided this study was minimization of harm. Clearance and relevant permissions were obtained from the responsible authorities. Effort was made to prevent potential risks to participants by ensuring that research process is conducted with sensitivity and care. Respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary participation were emphasized. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any moment without any negative consequences. Furthermore, strict protocols were established to safeguard the confidentiality of participants and protect sensitive information. Additionally, any cases of suspected child abuse that may arise during the research were handled with the utmost seriousness and reported to the appropriate authorities in accordance with legal and ethical guidelines.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The purpose of this study was to asses Social-cultural factors perpetuating child abuse in pastoralist community in Monduli district, Tanzania. Therefore, findings and discussions are centred on answering the following questions,
How do traditional beliefs among pastoralists contribute to the perpetuation of child abuse?
What social structures contribute to child abuse in pastoralist communities?
Demographic characteristics of the study sample size was analysed to get a picture of these variables (sex, age, Education level, and occupation) in the studied population.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Sex		
Male	113	31.7
Female	243	68.3
Age		
15-24	12	3.4
25-34	62	17.4
35-44	114	32.0
45-54	91	25.6
55-64	63	17.7
65-74	14	3.9
Education level		
Uneducated	62	17.4
Primary School	239	67.1
Secondary School	50	14.0
Advanced School	5	1.4

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Occupation		
Unemployed	28	7.9
Farmer	169	47.5
Animal Keeper	103	28.9
Non-Response	13	3.7
Farmer & Animal Keeper	16	4.5
Entrepreneur	20	5.6
Employed	7	2.0

4.1.1 Sex

The findings indicated a substantial gender disparity in participation, with most respondents being female. This significant skew in respondent distribution implies that the primary perspectives captured in this study are largely informed by women s central role in child-rearing and community participation, which is a common feature in pastoralist societies where women are often more available for community-based surveys. This suggests that intervention efforts focused on immediate behavioral change in child discipline and care should primarily be channelled through existing female social networks, as they represent the most readily available, willing, and engaged participants in issues concerning household welfare and child development. The notable underrepresentation of men who traditionally hold formal decision-making and economic authority in this patriarchal pastoralist society means the analysis risks overlooking crucial male perspectives that often govern high-level household policy and resource allocation.

High female participation aligns with Duale (2024), who notes that women in pastoralist communities are often more accessible for social research due to their domestic presence, giving the study high impact validity regarding domestic norms and care practices. The low impact of male voices suggests a significant gap in understanding the patriarchal authorization of practices like early marriage, a limitation often cited in similar anthropological studies. Furthermore, Musumba *et al.* (2022) argue that excluding male leaders undermines the long-term sustainability of interventions, meaning these findings treated as a starting point for engagement rather than a complete picture of community power dynamics. The gender imbalance also highlights a cultural divide where child welfare is viewed as a women's issue, a perception that itself constitutes a structural barrier to holistic protection.

4.1.2 Age

The age distribution revealed that respondents were primarily concentrated in the 35–44 years group. The findings predominantly reflect the established views, beliefs, and practices of the active working-age population who are currently in their prime parenting and community leadership stages. This concentration indicates that the established attitudes regarding discipline and child labour are those being measured, providing a robust snapshot of current parental practices rather than historical or aspirational ones. The dominance of the 35-44 age group ensures the study has a high impact on current policy formulation, as this demographic holds the most sway over current household economics and child labour decisions. the extremely low impact of the youth voice (3.4%) contrasts sharply with recommendations by Musumba *et al.* (2022) to include youth in solving youth-related problems and identifying a gap in intergenerational dialogue that future studies must address.

4.1.3 Education Level

The analysis of educational attainment showed that the majority of respondents, about 67.1%, attained only primary education, while those who had reached the Advanced School level constituted the lowest percentage at a mere 1.4%. This study implies that a large portion of the population operates with a generally low educational profile, which predisposes them to adhere to traditional norms that tolerate corporal punishment and child labor. The lack of formal exposure to modern child rights frameworks among the majority means that traditional, often harmful, practices are likely to go unchallenged by alternative, rights-based perspectives typically acquired through higher education.

The substantial proportion of respondents with low education suggests significant limitations in their ability to access, interpret, and process complex legal or psychological information regarding child development and the long-term consequences of abuse. This lower level of educational attainment correlates with a heightened dependence on informal or traditional knowledge systems for child-rearing guidance, which often conflict with modern child protection standards established by national and international law. The findings corroborate Duale (2024), establishing a high impact link between low formal education and the persistence of traditional harmful practices, validating the need for education-centric interventions. Literature suggests that primary education alone is often insufficient to shift deep seated cultural beliefs, implying that current schooling levels are not a protective factor against abuse, Musumba *et al.* (2022) emphasize that in such low-literacy contexts, interactive community dialogues are far more effective than pamphlets, directive for future programming derived directly from this specific demographic split.

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4.2 Occupation

The occupational status indicated that the majority of respondents were farmers. Findings of this study implies that the community s primary economic context is deeply rural and agrarian, raising the structural risk of child labor being viewed as a normal, necessary, and even virtuous component of household subsistence and survival, thereby normalizing a form of neglect and exploitation under the guise of cultural duty and economic necessity. The high reliance on agricultural and pastoral activities confirms a traditional and often resource-intensive economic structure where collective family labor, including that of children, is significance for household productivity and food security. This economic pressure places immediate needs for labor above children s rights to education and protection, leading to the rationalization of child labor as acceptable discipline or significance vocational training for future survival. This lack of economic diversity further entrenches the communitys reliance on traditional systems and limits the influence of external labor regulations that might otherwise protect children (Musumba *et al.*, 2022). These findings imply that legal frameworks alone are insufficient to transform such deeply rooted attitudes. Sustainable change requires culturally sensitive community dialogues that encourage reflection on traditional practices and their impacts on children

4.2.1 Traditional Beliefs and the Perpetuation of Child Abuse among Pastoralist Communities

The study shows the common pastoralists' traditional beliefs on child abuse perpetuation by examining the respondents' mean scores on five key statements, comparing them to the neutral point (3.0 on a 5-point Likert scale). This statistical approach allows for the identification of which beliefs are actively rejected versus those that remain entrenched or ambiguous, providing a quantitative measure of the community's internal normative agreement or disagreement with traditional justifications for harm. The analysis, summarized in Table 2, revealed significant internal movement away from certain traditional norms regarding authority and the maintenance of practices through fear, indicating a period of normative change within the community. The results underscore that the perpetuation of child abuse is not universally supported by conviction, but rather by mechanisms of social compliance and identity preservation.

The most decisive finding relates to the traditional authority structure which has long served to shield harmful practices. The statement Questioning elder's treatment is disrespect recorded the lowest mean score 2.48 among all traditional belief items, demonstrating the strongest degree of rejection (being furthest below the neutral mean of 3.0). This result is interpreted as a measurable shift where respondents no longer view absolute, unquestioning deference to traditional authority as universally paramount. The willingness to challenge the treatment meted out by elders' signals that the shield of unchallenged authority is fundamentally weakening, opening a pathway for internal reflection on traditional norms.

In direct relationship with the challenge to authority, the second most strongly rejected statement was Harmful practices maintained due to fear of breaking traditional customs, which recorded a mean of 2.55. This score, the second lowest, is interpreted as a collective acknowledgement that the continuity of abusive practices is not driven by genuine, internalized belief in their necessity, but primarily by an external social control mechanism. This strongly suggests that social pressure, fear of social sanction, exclusion, or punishment from the rigid community structure, is the primary force for compliance with these traditional norms of harm, confirming that this is a problem of social control rather than moral conviction. A third finding relates to the most common traditional practice of discipline. The statement Traditional beliefs justify physical punishment was also rejected, with a mean score of 2.72. While this mean is below the neutral point of 3.0, it is notably closer to neutral compared to the two others strongly rejected statements. This proximity suggests a measurable, but softer, intellectual rejection of traditional justifications for corporal punishment. This hints at a deep-seated cognitive conflict where respondents may intellectually disagree with the justification for abuse, but the behavioral habit of using physical force is so culturally resilient that outright abandonment or condemnation remains difficult.

The statement Cultural rites expose children to harm yielded a mean of 2.96, and Community members view some forms of child abuse as part of our cultural identity yielded a mean slightly above the neutral mark at 3.09. These results, which are both very close to the neutral mean of 3.0, imply that respondents hold a deliberately ambivalent or neutral stance towards norms they perceive as integral to their cultural identity. This strongly suggests that the community differentiates between discipline-based harm (which they are beginning to reject) and culturally mandated practices, which are viewed through a distinct, protected lens where they are unwilling to either strongly agree or strongly disagree.

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Table 2

Pastoralists Traditional Beliefs Perpetuating Child Abuse Practices

Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
Traditional beliefs justify physical punishment.	9.0	35.4	33.7	18.8	3.1	2.72	0.99
Cultural rites expose children to harm or abuse.	3.7	27.2	44.1	19.1	5.9	2.96	0.95
Questioning elders' treatment... is a sign of disrespect.	15.7	37.6	32.6	11.2	2.8	2.48	1.07
Harmful practices maintained due to fear of breaking traditional customs.	10.7	41.9	32.9	11.0	3.7	2.55	1.00
Community members view some forms of child abuse as part of our cultural identity.	13.8	17.2	29.7	25.1	14.1	3.09	1.27

Key: *SD = Strongly Disagree (1), D = Disagree (2), N = Neutral (3), A = Agree (4), SA = Strongly Agree (5)*

The comparison of mean scores provides indispensable quantitative evidence of the community's internal process of normative re-evaluation regarding traditional beliefs. The strongest rejection, evidenced by the lowest mean score of 2.48 for the statement on Questioning elder's treatment is disrespect, is interpreted as a clear and positive indication that the community is actively challenging the traditional power structure. This marks a shift away from absolute deference towards a framework where child welfare justifies challenging the traditional authority. This finding fundamentally challenges classical interpretations of Social Control Theory in traditional settings and shows that the community is beginning to perceive a valid reason to override the principle of unquestioning submission to authority, a principle which previously served as a primary perpetuator of harmful practices.

These results are consistent with findings from previous research conducted in similar socio-cultural contexts. Study by Waweru and Rono (2022) revealed that in many pastoralist societies, customary authority and cultural rites often hold greater contribution than formal statutory child-protection frameworks. Elders and traditional leaders are typically viewed as the ultimate custodians of moral and social order, meaning that external interventions are frequently evaluated through the lens of cultural preservation rather than legal compliance. The strong rejection of the idea that harmful practices maintained due to fear (mean of 2.55) is interpreted as a collective admission that the continuity of abusive practices is fundamentally driven by social control and compliance, rather than deeply held moral conviction. This indicates that abusive practices are conditional norms, sustained by the external threat of community sanction or social exclusion, making interventions focused on reducing the fear of reporting a high-impact leverage point. The low mean score confirms that the perpetuation of abuse is fundamentally a problem of social compliance and silence, necessitating interventions that reduce the perceived risk of reporting and intervention, which is significance to dismantle the fear-based perpetuation mechanism that silences dissent and prevents formal reporting.

The moderate rejection of the justification for physical punishment (mean of 2.72) is interpreted as evidence of a deep-seated cognitive and behavioural conflict, where intellectual rejection of the justification clashes with the established habit of the practice. The fact that the mean is closest to the neutral point among the rejected items suggests a measurable, but softer, intellectual disagreement with the justification for abuse, yet the practice itself remains resilient. This finding strongly corroborates the result that found corporal punishment to be a non-significant predictor of overall abusive perception, confirming its status as a profoundly embedded cultural baseline (Kalolo and Kapinga, 2023). The discussion on eradicating corporal punishment must therefore transcend simple prohibition and move towards the urgent provision of alternative, culturally appropriate, and practical non-violent parenting techniques as a form of skill substitution. This normalization of abuse as a disciplinary tool is reinforced by qualitative evidence from an interview with a pastoralist community leader in the study area, who remarked:

> *…."I believe that physical punishment is necessary to instil discipline, obedience, and respect in children, and to us these practices are part of our culture, not something we consider as abuse…" (KII 16th September 2025)*

These perspectives are entirely consistent with findings from other studies conducted in rural and pastoralist settings. Archambault, (2009), observed that corporal punishment and other forms of harsh discipline remain socially sanctioned under the guise of traditional child-rearing practices, where parents often believe they are fulfilling their moral obligations by disciplining children physically, as non-physical approaches are viewed as signs of weakness or moral decay. This tension between cultural norms and modern child-protection principles often results in community resistance to legal and advocacy interventions, a resistance that Kelmendi *et al.*, (2022) further argue is caused by social norms conflating discipline with abuse, thus undermining the effectiveness of both advocacy and legal reform efforts.

Furthermore, the highly neutral results concerning statements about cultural rites (mean of 2.96) and identity (mean of 3.09) are interpreted as the community actively drawing a defensive boundary around practices they perceive as integral to their cultural survival. This suggests a complex process of normative boundary setting, where respondents are willing to reject general abusive discipline but maintain ambiguity or slight acceptance for practices

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perceived as vital to cultural continuity. Similarly, UNICEF (2017) reported that corporal punishment, early marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM) remain socially sanctioned in numerous rural African communities, particularly where traditional practices are perceived as significance for maintaining cultural identity and social cohesion.

4.2.2 The Role of Social Structures in the Perpetuation of Child Abuse among Pastoralist Communities

The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that the social structure within the study community plays a substantial role in shaping the patterns and persistence of child abuse. The analysis of the social structure within the study community reveals complex dynamics contributing to child protection, as detailed in Table 3. The quantitative findings indicate that the extended family system is perceived as having the strongest contribution on child discipline (Mean= 3.09, SD =1.34), closely followed by the perception that formal institutions provide limited support in addressing child abuse (Mean= 3.19, SD =0.96). Other key structural factors show ambiguity, with the contribution of local leaders (Mean= 2.99, SD =1.33) and the contribution of poverty (Mean=3.00, SD =1.25) hovering near. Furthermore, the community moderately disagreed that child abuse cases are resolved informally through traditional systems (Mean=2.83, SD =1.21), suggesting a preference for formal resolution despite acknowledged structural weaknesses. Overall, the high standard deviations across the board signal significant heterogeneity in perceptions among community members regarding these socio-structural drivers of child abuse. These numerical ambiguities are contrasted by the clear qualitative insight obtained from a key informant, which highlights the pervasive contribution of cultural hierarchies on reporting and resolution. The informant stated:

> *....There is a strong culture of silence and fear of disrespecting elders. Families avoid reporting abuse to protect their reputation. Power structures favour men and elders, which discourages open discussion. (KI2 17th September 2025)*

This observation suggests that deeply rooted cultural barriers and power dynamics often suppress open discussion and formal reporting, complicating the interpretation of the quantitative data where responses often clustered around the neutral point, emphasizing the hidden nature of the problem.

Table 3

Social structure and its contribution on child abuse

Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
Local leaders and elders have a strong contribution on how children are treated in this community	14.0	23.0	26.4	20.8	15.7	2.99	1.33
The extended family system plays a significant role in decisions about child discipline	13.2	21.3	24.7	25.0	15.7	3.09	1.34
Poverty and lack of basic services in this area contribute to child abuse	11.8	25.0	25.3	26.7	11.2	3.00	1.25
Child abuse cases are often resolved informally through traditional systems rather than legal channels	12.6	26.1	28.4	24.4	8.4	2.83	1.21
There is limited support from formal institutions (such as police or social workers) in addressing child abuse	7.6	19.7	26.7	37.6	8.4	3.19	1.13

Key: *SD = Strongly Disagree (1), D = Disagree (2), N = Neutral (3), A = Agree (4), SA = Strongly Agree (5)*

The analysis of the social structure within the study community reveals that traditional authority systems and communal organization are central to shaping both the patterns and persistence of child abuse, often acting as primary mechanisms for norm reinforcement. The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that the social structure plays a substantial role, with respondents largely agreeing that local leaders and elders have significant contribute over how children are treated (Mean = 2.99, SD = 1.33), highlighting the strong connection between social hierarchy and family behavior. The mean value, which is very close to the neutral point (3.0), suggests that while the contribution of elders is recognized, there is considerable ambiguity or division within the community about the nature or acceptance of that contribution. The relatively high standard deviation (SD = 1.33) reinforces this ambiguity, suggesting that perceptions vary significantly among community members, possibly due to differences in exposure to education, economic conditions, or proximity to external awareness campaigns. This variability underscores that while traditional authority is a unifying feature of pastoralist and rural societies, its influence is not uniform, and interventions must recognize these internal distinctions when designing community-based child protection initiatives.

The centrality of elders and local leaders in shaping social norms is highly consistent with UNICEF (2021) analysis of the drivers of abuse against children in Tanzania. The report found that in many rural and pastoralist areas, local leaders hold moral and administrative authority that often supersedes formal law enforcement in matters related to family discipline and conflict resolution. Their interpretations of acceptable behavior thus directly affect the prevalence and acceptance of child abuse. When such leaders endorse corporal punishment, early marriages, or other harmful practices, these behaviors are normalized and perpetuated across generations. When leaders advocate for

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children s rights and protection, catalyse significant behavioral change across the community. Similarly, Reuben *et al.*, (2022) observed that the social influence of community leaders a double-edged sword in efforts to address child abuse: either resist interventions perceived as threats to cultural values or, when effectively engaged, become key allies in advocacy and reform by lending legitimacy to new ideas.

An even stronger consensus emerged regarding the contribution of the extended family system on decisions about child discipline (Mean= 3.09, SD =1.34). While this mean is slightly above the neutral point, its proximity to 3.0, coupled with the high standard deviation, indicates a significant to extended family not just parents as central to child-rearing practices. In the study community, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and older siblings often has significance roles in shaping children s behavior and determining appropriate disciplinary measures. This finding aligns with cross-cultural research by Lansford *et al.,* (2015) and studies conducted across East Africa, which demonstrate that extended kin networks serve as important social units for enforcing disciplinary norms and transmitting cultural values. These networks often act as both caregivers and decision-makers, influencing not only the upbringing of children but also the community s collective perception of acceptable parenting practices. Given this strong influence, child-protection interventions that focus solely on parents are likely to have limited effectiveness, fail to involve the wider kinship network, calling for inclusive strategies that engage all influential relatives to ensure consistent practices and lasting behavioral change within families and communities.

Poverty and inadequate access to basic services also emerged as important drivers of child abuse, with respondents largely agreeing that economic hardship contributes significantly to abusive practices Mean 3.00 , SD =1.25. The mean score is exactly at the neutral point, confirming that this is an ambiguous factor for the community. This finding supports evidence from the Tanzania Abuse Against Children and Youth Survey (United Republic of Tanzania & CDC) and recent systematic reviews by Barchi and AbiNader (2025) and Moyo *et al.*, (2025), which link financial stress and lack of significance services to heightened vulnerability among children. Caregivers facing economic hardship often experience frustration and emotional exhaustion, increasing the likelihood of resorting to harsh disciplinary methods. Moreover, limited access to social protection, education, and health services reduces the community s ability to seek help or intervene in cases of abuse. These findings emphasize that effective child-protection interventions must extend beyond awareness-raising to address the structural conditions that perpetuate abuse, requiring the integration of poverty-reduction initiatives such as livelihood programs and cash transfers into child-protection strategies.

The results also indicate a moderate level of disagreement that child abuse cases are often resolved informally through traditional systems rather than through formal legal channels (Mean=2.83, SD=1.21). While the mean leans toward disagreement, the result is close to the neutral point, suggesting that while the community prefers formal resolution, informal systems remain highly active. This mirrors findings from UNICEF (2021) and other community-based protection studies in Tanzania, which show that customary dispute-resolution mechanisms are often more trusted, accessible, and affordable than statutory systems. Elders and community leaders are frequently approached to mediate cases involving children, as their authority is perceived as legitimate and culturally appropriate. However, while these informal systems offer swift resolution, they often prioritize social harmony and reconciliation over the protection of children s rights.

Finally, respondents moderately agreed that formal institutions such as the police and social welfare officers provide limited support in addressing child abuse (Mean= 3.19, SD =0.96). This finding points to a perception of weak statutory response and limited institutional presence, particularly in remote rural areas. Similar shortcomings have been documented in national assessments of child-protection systems and cost analyses of service delivery in Tanzania, which highlight shortages of trained personnel, inadequate logistical support, and underfunded programs (UNICEF, 2021; United Republic of Tanzania & CDC,). Many social workers face overwhelming caseloads and lack transportation, while police officers are often not adequately trained in child-sensitive investigation methods. Strengthening formal child-protection structures, therefore, remains a significance priority through expanding the number of trained social workers and enhancing public trust in these institutions via consistent, transparent service delivery to encourage community members to report abuse rather than rely solely on informal systems. The quantitative findings, which highlight the complexity of structural contribution in addressing child abuse, were further supported by the insights of a key informant who observed that:

> *"…. There is a strong culture of silence and fear of disrespecting elders. Families avoid reporting abuse to protect their reputation. Power structures favor men and elders, which discourages open discussion…" (KI 3 16th September 2025)*

This qualitative insight illustrates how deeply rooted cultural hierarchies and power dynamics within the community significantly shape how child protection is understood and practiced. Elders and extended family members continue to wield considerable authority over household and community decision-making, including issues related to child discipline and welfare. This often dictates what is considered acceptable behaviour, with traditional norms and values overshadowing modern child-protection principles, where practices like corporal punishment and early

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marriage are frequently justified as part of cultural preservation.

Moreover, the findings highlight that the authority of elders and the communal nature of decision-making often suppress open discussions about abuse. Families refrain from reporting incidents due to fear of disrespecting elders or being perceived as disloyal to their kin. This culture of silence perpetuates impunity and discourages victims from seeking justice. The sense of obligation to maintain family honour and community reputation leads to internal handling of abuse cases through informal negotiations rather than formal legal processes. As noted by UNICEF (2020), such dynamics are common in rural and pastoralist communities in Tanzania, where social cohesion and respect for hierarchy are prioritized over individual protection.

Comparative studies across sub-Saharan Africa (Moyo, 2025) also demonstrate similar trends, where rigid hierarchies and patriarchal authority limit opportunities for children to express grievances or access support. These cultural power relations intersect with poverty, limited education, and weak institutional presence to sustain environments where child abuse remains hidden or normalized. The combination of social control, fear, and reverence for tradition thus creates systemic challenges that legal reforms alone cannot resolve. For child protection interventions to be effective in such contexts, they must be grounded in cultural understanding and community participation. These findings are also similar to the findings of the studies by (Maternowska *et al.*, 2018, Kalolo and Kapinga (2023) who reported how social structures contribute to child abuse.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The findings reveal that child abuse in Monduli District is widely recognized but remains largely concealed due to a culture of silence deeply rooted in the community. Perceptions of limited support from formal child protection institutions have significantly eroded trust, causing many community members to rely on informal mechanisms despite doubts about their effectiveness. This indicates that while the community is aware of abuse as a serious challenge, they feel unsupported by existing formal systems. As a result, strengthening local reporting mechanisms emerges as the community's top priority, signalling an urgent need for trusted, accessible, and responsive protection services.

Traditional beliefs and customary norms remain powerful forces shaping attitudes and responses to child abuse. The extended family system and the authority of traditional leaders play a central role in normalizing harmful practices and discouraging external reporting. These structures perpetuate the belief that child-related matters should be resolved within the clan or through elders, thereby protecting perpetrators and silencing victims. Social structures in Monduli District characterized by hierarchical decision-making, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic vulnerabilities create conditions that heighten children's exposure to abuse. Weak formal systems limited institutional accountability, and persistent economic stress within households further entrench these risks. The interconnectedness of these structural challenges means that interventions must go beyond surface-level actions.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends the following, Local Government and NGOs should lead the design of integrated interventions that combine awareness campaigns with poverty alleviation and livelihood diversification programs, explicitly targeting vulnerable households and adult cohorts identified in the demographics. Community Development Officers and Social Workers must prioritize culturally sensitive dialogues, including Positive Parenting Programs, to reshape harmful norms. This involves actively engaging Traditional Leaders and Elders as partners in reform and establishing clear referral pathways between informal and formal justice systems. Local Government Authorities should strengthen formal child protection services by increasing the number of trained social workers and police in the district and establishing decentralized, child-friendly reporting posts to meet the community demand for improved reporting mechanisms. Educational Institutions should enforce zero-tolerance policies on corporal punishment and, in partnership with Parents, support and enforce consistent school attendance to reduce reliance on child labor and mitigate risks in vulnerable locations like Marketplaces.

Declaration of Interest

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