

Examining the Factors Contributing to Increased Sexual Harassment among Youth in Urban West Region Zanzibar

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Abstract: Sexual harassment among youth is an important social and psychological concern that can affect interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being and social development. This study examined the factors contributing to increased sexual harassment among youth in the Urban West Region of Zanzibar. The study was guided by three objectives: to identify social factors, explore psychological factors and examine family-related factors contributing to sexual harassment among youth. A qualitative approach and descriptive research design were adopted. Sixty participants were purposively selected from Amani, Mwanakwerekwe, Malindi and Magomeni. The participants comprised 30 youth aged 15–30 years, including 15 males and 15 females, and 30 key informants consisting of teachers, parents, psychologists, social workers and counsellors. Data were collected through interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that peer pressure, harmful social media exposure, substance abuse, urban lifestyle, cultural beliefs, gender stereotypes and weak community awareness were important social factors. Psychological factors included low self-esteem, poor emotional control, anger, exposure to violence and trauma, inadequate coping skills and limited awareness of consent. Family-related factors included weak parental supervision, poor parent-child communication, family conflict, domestic violence, economic hardship, neglect and unstable family structures. The findings demonstrate that sexual harassment among youth is a multidimensional problem influenced by interacting social, psychological and family circumstances. The study highlights the importance of integrated prevention involving families, schools, communities, counselling services and relevant institutions.

Keywords: Consent, Family Factors, Psychological Factors, Sexual Harassment, Social Factors, Youth, Zanzibar.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a significant social problem affecting individuals in educational institutions, workplaces, public spaces, online environments and communities. It may involve unwanted sexual comments, gestures, behaviours, advances or other conduct that violates an individual's dignity and personal boundaries. Among youth, sexual harassment is particularly concerning because experiences of harassment may affect psychological well-being, social relationships, education and family life (Chivers-Wilson, 2006; Shad et al., 2023).

Previous studies have demonstrated that sexual harassment and related forms of sexual violence occur in different social and institutional settings. Research has also shown that sexual harassment may have psychological consequences, including emotional distress, anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem and difficulties in social functioning (Chivers-Wilson, 2006; Rosen & Martin, 1998). However, sexual harassment should not be understood only in terms of its consequences. Understanding the factors that contribute to its occurrence is important for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

In Tanzania, sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence remain important concerns. Research has identified the influence of cultural norms, gender inequality and unequal power relationships on sexual behaviour and vulnerability to sexual violence (Abeid et al., 2014; Welsh, 1999). In Zanzibar, concerns regarding sexual violence and harassment have also been documented. The existing evidence indicates that young people may experience sexual harassment within families, educational environments, communities and other social settings. Such circumstances demonstrate the importance of examining the broader social environment in which young people live and interact.

The Urban West Region provides an important context for examining sexual harassment among youth because it includes highly populated urban communities where young people interact with diverse peer groups, social networks and digital environments. The rapid expansion of social media has also created new environments in which young people may encounter sexualized content, harmful gender stereotypes and inappropriate online interactions. At the same time, family relationships, parental supervision, economic conditions and cultural expectations may influence how youth understand relationships, consent and appropriate interpersonal behaviour.

The present study therefore focused on youth aged 15–30 years in the Urban West Region of Zanzibar. The study examined three broad categories of factors: social, psychological and family-related factors. Social factors included peer pressure, social media exposure, substance use, urban lifestyle, cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes. Psychological factors included self-esteem, emotional control, anger, trauma, coping skills and awareness of consent. Family-related factors included parental supervision, parent-child communication, family conflict, domestic violence, economic hardship and family stability.

The study was guided by three specific objectives: to identify social factors that contribute to the increase of sexual harassment among youth in urban areas; to explore psychological factors that contribute to the increase of sexual harassment among youth in urban areas; and to examine the contribution of family-related factors to the increase of sexual harassment among youth in urban regions.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided primarily by **Social Learning Theory** and supported by **Feminist Theory**.

i. Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), explains that human behaviour can be learned through observation, imitation, modelling and reinforcement. Individuals may observe behaviours performed by peers, family members, community members or media figures and subsequently reproduce those behaviours when they are accepted or rewarded within their environment.

The theory is particularly relevant to sexual harassment among youth because young people interact continuously with peers, families, communities and media. When sexually inappropriate jokes, comments, gestures, aggressive behaviour or disrespectful attitudes are repeatedly observed and tolerated, young people may gradually perceive them as normal. Social media can also function as a contemporary environment for observational learning because young people may repeatedly encounter behaviours and attitudes that receive attention or approval online.

The findings of this study support this perspective. Peer pressure, harmful social media exposure, exposure to violence, family conflict and parental behaviour were identified as factors through which young people may observe, imitate and reinforce inappropriate behaviours. Thus, Social Learning Theory provides an important explanation of how behaviours associated with sexual harassment may be learned and maintained within social environments.

ii. Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory explains sexual harassment in relation to gender inequality, patriarchy and unequal power relations. From this perspective, harassment is not simply an individual behavioural problem but may also reflect broader social structures that privilege male dominance and reinforce female submissiveness.

The theory is relevant to the present study because participants identified cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes as factors contributing to harassment. The findings showed that beliefs portraying men as dominant and women as submissive may normalize inappropriate behaviours and discourage victims from reporting harassment. Feminist Theory therefore helps explain how social expectations and unequal power relationships may create an environment in which harassment is tolerated or minimized.

The two theories complement each other. Social Learning Theory explains how behaviours can be learned through observation and reinforcement, while Feminist Theory explains how gender norms, patriarchy and unequal power relationships can create the social conditions in which harassment becomes normalized.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach and a descriptive research design. The qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' perceptions, experiences and explanations concerning factors contributing to sexual harassment rather than to quantify prevalence. A descriptive design was used to describe the phenomenon as it occurred within the study setting without manipulating variables.

2.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in the Urban West Region of Zanzibar, specifically Amani, Mwanakwerekwe, Malindi and Magomeni. The target population consisted of youth aged 15–30 years residing in the study area, together with key informants whose professional or community experience was relevant to youth and sexual harassment. The dissertation reports that Zanzibar had an estimated 384,647 youth aged 15–30 years according to OCGS (2023).

2.3 Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge, experience or characteristics related to sexual harassment among youth. The sample consisted of 60 participants: 30 youth aged 15–30 years, comprising 15 males and 15 females, and 30 key informants consisting of 5 teachers, 5 parents, 10 psychologists, 5 social workers and 5 counsellors. The use of purposive sampling enabled the study to obtain detailed information from participants who could provide context-specific perspectives.

2.4 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through interviews. Interviews were appropriate because they allowed participants to explain their perceptions and experiences in their own words. Questions addressed social factors, psychological factors and family-related factors, including peer pressure, social media, substance use, emotional regulation, trauma, consent, parental supervision, communication, domestic violence, economic hardship and family stability.

2.5 Data Analysis

Interview information was analysed using thematic analysis. Responses were reviewed and organized around recurring ideas and patterns related to the three study objectives. Themes were developed concerning social, psychological and family-related factors and were interpreted in relation to previous empirical studies and the theoretical framework.

2.6 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was strengthened through attention to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The researcher maintained consistency in participant selection, data collection, organization and interpretation. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were protected, and efforts were made to minimize psychological or emotional harm. The study also emphasized respect, dignity and integrity in handling participants' information.

TABLE: 1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Demographic Information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age: Below 15 years	0	0.0
Age: 15–25 years	32	53.3
Age: 25–35 years	23	38.3
Age: Over 35 years	5	8.3
Male	15	25.0

Female	45	75.0
Secondary education	36	60.0
College education	3	5.0
University education	21	35.0
Employed	15	25.0
Self-employed	1	1.7
Unemployed	3	5.0
Student	41	68.3
Single	37	61.7
Married	19	31.7
Divorced	4	6.7
Total	60	100.0

Source: Field Data (2026)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented according to the three research objectives. Thematic analysis identified interconnected social, psychological and family-related factors contributing to sexual harassment among youth. The demographic profile shows that 53.3% of respondents were aged 15–25 years, 75.0% were female, 60.0% had secondary education, 68.3% were students and 61.7% were single. The respondents included both youth and key informants; therefore, some respondents above the youth age range were professional or community informants.

3.1 Social Factors Contributing to Increased Sexual Harassment

The first objective examined social factors contributing to increased sexual harassment. The findings identified peer pressure, harmful social media exposure, substance abuse, urban lifestyle, cultural beliefs, gender stereotypes and weak community awareness programmes as important social influences. Participants from different groups consistently described the social environment as an important setting in which young people develop attitudes toward sexuality, respect, consent and interpersonal behaviour.

3.1.1 Peer Pressure

Peer pressure emerged as a major social factor. Participants explained that young people may imitate friends in order to obtain acceptance, demonstrate maturity or avoid rejection. Harassment may begin as joking or group behaviour and become normalized when peers reward or encourage it. Counsellors and social workers similarly indicated that peer influence can override family teachings and personal values when young people strongly seek group approval.

The finding is consistent with Espelage, Basile and Hamburger (2012), who found relationships between peer-related behaviours and later sexual violence perpetration. Foshee et al. (2016) also identified shared psychological, family and contextual risk factors associated with sexual harassment among adolescents exposed to domestic violence. From the perspective of Social Learning Theory, peer groups act as behavioural models through which young people observe, imitate and receive reinforcement for particular behaviours (Bandura, 1977).

3.1.2 Social Media and Harmful Online Content

Participants reported that social media can normalize inappropriate sexual behaviour through jokes, memes, videos, viral content and online interactions. Young people may imitate behaviours that attract likes, attention or approval. Counsellors and social workers noted that online harassment may remain unchecked and that existing awareness programmes are often insufficient to counter harmful online content.

These findings are consistent with Henry and Powell (2018), who described technology-facilitated sexual violence as an important area of concern, and Livingstone and Third (2017), who emphasized the influence of digital environments on young people's experiences and rights. Social media can therefore operate as a modern social-learning environment where repeated exposure and social reinforcement influence attitudes and behaviour.

3.1.3 Substance Abuse and Urban Lifestyle

The study found that substance abuse and urban lifestyle patterns may increase the likelihood of sexual harassment. Participants explained that alcohol and drugs can impair judgment, reduce self-control and increase aggression. Urban nightlife, crowded social spaces and diverse peer networks may also expose young people to situations where boundaries are less respected and harassment can occur without effective social accountability.

This finding agrees with Testa and Cleveland (2017), who examined the contribution of alcohol to sexual assault perpetration among college men. The finding also supports the broader view that substance use may interact with social and environmental factors to increase risky behaviour. Prevention of sexual harassment therefore needs to address substance use alongside education on consent and respectful relationships.

3.1.4 Cultural Beliefs, Gender Roles and Community Awareness

Cultural beliefs and traditional gender roles were also identified as important factors. Participants described social expectations that portray men as dominant and women as submissive. Such beliefs may minimize harassment, discourage reporting and create unequal power relations. Weak community awareness programmes and inadequate accountability mechanisms were also reported as factors that allow harmful behaviours to persist.

The findings are consistent with Abeid et al. (2014), who reported that patriarchal traditions in Tanzania can influence gender relations and perceptions of sexual decision-making. Jewkes, Flood and Lang (2015) similarly emphasized the importance of changing harmful gender norms in preventing violence against women and girls. Feminist Theory helps explain this finding by highlighting how unequal power relations and gender stereotypes may normalize harassment and silence victims.

Overall, the social findings demonstrate that harassment is shaped by the environment in which young people live. Peer groups, digital media, substance use, urban lifestyles and gender norms may interact to create conditions in which inappropriate sexual behaviours are learned, tolerated or insufficiently challenged.

3.2 Psychological Factors Contributing to Increased Sexual Harassment

The second objective examined psychological factors. The findings identified low self-esteem, poor emotional control, anger, exposure to violence and trauma, inadequate coping mechanisms and limited awareness of consent as important psychological influences. These factors were described as interacting with social and family environments rather than operating independently.

3.2.1 Low Self-Esteem

Participants reported that low self-esteem and insecurity may lead some young people to seek validation, recognition or a sense of power through risky or aggressive behaviour. Low self-esteem was also associated with increased vulnerability to peer influence. Some participants explained that harassment may be used as a misguided way of gaining attention or demonstrating dominance.

The finding is consistent with Donnellan et al. (2005), who found a relationship between low self-esteem and aggression, antisocial behaviour and delinquency. Orth and Robins (2014) also emphasized the importance of self-esteem in psychological adjustment. The present findings therefore suggest that strengthening self-worth and resilience may form part of preventive counselling interventions.

3.2.2 Poor Emotional Control and Anger

Poor emotional regulation and unmanaged anger were reported to increase impulsive and aggressive responses. Participants explained that youth who struggle to manage frustration may react without considering consequences, reducing empathy and respect for personal boundaries. Counsellors and psychologists emphasized that weak coping skills can make young people more likely to express tension through harmful behaviour.

Gross (2015) explains that emotional regulation is important in controlling responses to emotional experiences, while Robertson, Daffern and Bucks (2012) link difficulties in emotion regulation with aggression. These findings support the need for counselling approaches that teach emotional regulation, anger management, coping skills and constructive communication.

3.2.3 Exposure to Violence and Trauma

Exposure to domestic or community violence and other traumatic experiences was reported to influence how youth understand relationships and aggression. Participants indicated that repeated exposure may desensitize young people to harmful behaviour and lead some to regard aggression as normal. Trauma may also contribute to insecurity, anger, poor emotional regulation and reduced empathy.

This finding is consistent with Social Learning Theory because repeated observation of aggression may provide models for later behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Widom (2017) also discusses long-term consequences of childhood maltreatment and its association with later behavioural difficulties. The findings highlight the importance of early identification of trauma and accessible psychological support for young people.

3.2.4 Limited Awareness of Consent

Limited understanding of consent emerged as another psychological and educational factor. Participants explained that some young people do not clearly understand personal boundaries, voluntary agreement and the difference between respectful interaction and harassment. Misinterpreting silence, hesitation or fear as consent may increase the risk of inappropriate behaviour.

The finding supports UNESCO (2018), which emphasizes the role of comprehensive sexuality education in improving understanding of consent, respect, healthy relationships and gender equality. DeGue et al. (2014) similarly identified prevention programmes addressing respectful relationships and related risk factors as important components of sexual violence prevention.

Overall, the psychological findings indicate that individual emotional and cognitive characteristics interact with social experiences. Low self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, trauma, inadequate coping and limited consent knowledge may increase vulnerability to harassment or contribute to inappropriate behaviour. Counselling and psychological services therefore have an important preventive and supportive role.

3.3 Family-Related Factors Contributing to Increased Sexual Harassment

The third objective examined family-related factors. The findings identified weak parental supervision, poor parent-child communication, family conflict and domestic violence, economic hardship, neglect and unstable family structures as important contributors. The family was described as a major environment for learning values, boundaries, emotional regulation and interpersonal behaviour.

3.3.1 Weak Parental Supervision

Participants reported that weak parental supervision can increase young people's exposure to risky peer groups, harmful media and unsafe environments. Lack of monitoring may reduce accountability and make it easier for young people to experiment with behaviours without adequate guidance. Parents, counsellors, psychologists and social workers consistently described parental involvement as a protective factor.

These findings are consistent with Borawski et al. (2003) and DiClemente et al. (2001), who associated parental monitoring with adolescent health and risk behaviours. Effective supervision does not imply excessive control; rather, it involves appropriate guidance, monitoring, emotional support and communication.

3.3.2 Poor Parent-Child Communication

Poor communication was found to create emotional distance and leave young people without reliable information about consent, relationships and personal boundaries. Participants indicated that when parents avoid discussing sexuality and emotional difficulties, young people may seek information from peers or social media, where messages may be inaccurate or harmful.

Widman et al. (2016) found that parent-adolescent communication is associated with safer sexual behaviour, while Commendador (2010) emphasized parental influence on adolescent decision-making. The present findings therefore support the strengthening of open, age-appropriate and non-judgmental communication within families.

3.3.3 Family Conflict and Domestic Violence

Family conflict and domestic violence were reported to influence youth attitudes toward relationships. Young people who repeatedly witness aggression may learn that dominance, intimidation and force are normal ways of dealing with interpersonal conflict. Some may reproduce similar patterns in their own relationships, while others may develop fear and insecurity that affects their ability to establish healthy relationships.

This finding is strongly compatible with Social Learning Theory because parents and other family members can serve as important behavioural models (Bandura, 1977). Feminist Theory also helps explain how gendered power relations within families may reinforce male dominance and female submissiveness, creating conditions in which harassment is normalized.

3.3.4 Economic Hardship

Economic hardship was identified as a factor that can weaken family protection and increase young people's dependence on external sources of financial or emotional support. Participants explained that parents under financial pressure may have less time for supervision, while some young people may enter relationships in which money or material support creates unequal power and vulnerability to exploitation.

This finding is consistent with Wodon et al. (2017), who described economic vulnerability as a factor associated with exploitative and transactional relationships, and with UNICEF (2021), which highlights the vulnerability of children and young people where protective systems are weak.

3.3.5 Unstable Family Structures and Parental Absence

Parental absence, divorce, neglect and unstable family structures were reported to reduce emotional support and guidance. Young people may turn to peers, social media or other external sources for acceptance and direction. Participants linked parental absence with insecurity, poor emotional regulation and increased vulnerability to negative social influences.

The finding is consistent with research showing that family instability and limited parental involvement may increase adolescents' vulnerability to abuse and related risks (Annor et al., 2023; Jernbro et al., 2022). The findings therefore indicate that strengthening family relationships and support systems is important for reducing vulnerability to sexual harassment.

Taken together, the family findings demonstrate that family relationships can function either as protective environments or as contexts in which harmful behaviours are learned and reinforced. Strong supervision, open communication, non-violent relationships, emotional support and family stability can reduce vulnerability, whereas neglect, violence, economic hardship and parental absence may increase it.

3.4 Theoretical Integration of Findings

The findings are consistent with the study's theoretical framework. Social Learning Theory explains how youth may acquire and reinforce behaviours through observation, imitation and social reinforcement. This is evident in the influence of peers, social media, family behaviour and exposure to violence. When inappropriate behaviours are repeatedly observed and rewarded or tolerated, they may become normalized.

Feminist Theory complements this explanation by focusing on gender inequality, patriarchy and power relations. The findings on cultural beliefs, male dominance, female submissiveness, victim blaming and barriers to reporting show that harassment can be embedded within broader social structures. Together, the two theories provide a multidimensional explanation: Social Learning Theory explains how behaviours are learned in everyday environments, while Feminist Theory explains how unequal gender relations can create and sustain environments in which harassment is normalized.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study concludes that sexual harassment among youth in the Urban West Region of Zanzibar is a complex and interconnected social and psychological problem. It is not caused by a single factor; rather, it develops through interactions among social environments, psychological characteristics and family conditions.

Social factors were found to include peer pressure, harmful social media exposure, substance abuse, urban lifestyles, cultural beliefs, gender stereotypes and weak community awareness. These factors can shape young people's attitudes, provide models for behaviour and create environments where harassment is tolerated or insufficiently challenged.

Psychological factors included low self-esteem, poor emotional regulation, anger, exposure to violence and trauma, inadequate coping skills and limited understanding of consent. These factors may influence decision-making, empathy, self-control and respect for personal boundaries. Their effects may become stronger when combined with negative peer, media or family influences.

Family-related factors included weak parental supervision, poor parent-child communication, family conflict, domestic violence, economic hardship, neglect and unstable family structures. These conditions may reduce emotional support and guidance and increase young people's reliance on external influences. Conversely, supportive family relationships can provide important protection.

The study therefore concludes that effective prevention requires coordinated action rather than isolated interventions. Families, schools, counselling and psychological services, communities, religious institutions, government authorities and youth organizations all have roles in creating environments that promote respect, consent, healthy relationships and accountability.

Recommendations

1. Government institutions, schools, community organizations, religious institutions and youth organizations should strengthen awareness programmes addressing sexual harassment, consent, respectful relationships, gender equality and harmful gender stereotypes.
2. Schools and youth organizations should establish positive peer-education programmes that help young people resist negative peer pressure and promote respectful social behaviour.
3. Prevention programmes should address alcohol and substance use among youth and provide accessible counselling, rehabilitation, life-skills education and referral services where substance use is associated with risky behaviour.
4. Schools and communities should strengthen confidential counselling and psychological support services for young people experiencing low self-esteem, anger, trauma, emotional distress and poor coping skills.
5. Age-appropriate education on consent, personal boundaries and healthy relationships should be integrated into youth programmes so that young people clearly understand voluntary agreement and respect for others' rights.
6. Parents and guardians should strengthen supervision while maintaining open and supportive communication about sexuality, relationships, consent, peer pressure, social media and emotional challenges.
7. Families experiencing domestic violence, conflict, neglect or economic hardship should have access to counselling, social welfare and referral services that strengthen positive parenting and family stability.
8. Schools and relevant institutions should establish clear and confidential reporting and referral mechanisms for sexual harassment, with appropriate links to counselling, health and legal services.
9. Government, schools, families, community organizations and other stakeholders should improve coordination so that prevention, reporting, protection and psychological support are addressed as interconnected activities.
10. Future research should compare urban and rural youth in Zanzibar and examine the effectiveness of school- and community-based counselling programmes, the role of social media, the relationship between substance use and harassment, family dynamics, and the effectiveness of existing reporting and intervention mechanisms.

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