

# FAMILY CONTRIBUTION AND THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN PREVENTING SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN TANZANIA: A CASE STUDY OF TEMEKE MUNICIPALITY, DAR ES SALAAM REGION

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the role of families and digital technologies in preventing sexual abuse among adolescent girls in Temeke Municipality, Dar es Salaam. Guided by the Social Impact Theory, Social-Ecological Theory, and Social Learning Theory, the study examines how family dynamics and digital communication tools influence adolescent behaviour. The objectives of the study were to: investigate family contribution to protection of adolescent girls; and investigate preventive measures for reducing sexual abuse among adolescents using technology, mass media, and artificial intelligence as modern communication tools. Using purposive sampling and a qualitative design, 20 key informants were interviewed, and the collected data were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that while parental involvement is essential, poverty and digital exposure significantly shape girls' understanding of sexuality and safety. In some cases, reliance on technology has weakened parental engagement. The study concludes that integrating family-based prevention with media literacy was critical to promoting positive digital influence and enhancing adolescent protection. The study recommends integrating family-based sexual abuse prevention efforts with media literacy programs to enhance critical media analysis skills and to ensure that the mass media serves as a positive tool for child protection and adolescent development.*

**Keywords:** Family, Sexual Abuse, Digital Technologies, Temeke Municipality, and Adolescent Girls

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The family plays a crucial role in preventing child sexual abuse, especially among adolescent girls, by fostering open communication, teaching personal boundaries and consent, and providing emotional support. By building trust and helping, girls recognize unsafe situations and parents create a protective environment against abuse. Monitoring relationships and setting clear rules further reduce risks. However, the rise of digital technologies, mass media, and AI has introduced new threats, such as cyberbullying, online predators, and exposure to sexual content. Promoting digital literacy and online safety has therefore become essential in safeguarding children from both physical and online forms of sexual abuse (CHANZO, 2024; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Luperiello et al., 2023; WB, 2022).

Globally, about 650 million adolescent girls were affected by Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and it was a major public health and human rights concern (WB, 2022). WHO reports that one in five women and one in thirteen men were sexually abused as children, with girls more affected (WB, 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, a high prevalence (about 79 million adolescent girls) was linked to poverty, weak protection systems, and cultural silence (UNICEF, 2023). CSA includes a range of unwanted sexual behaviours, from verbal advances to physical abuse (Gonzalez et al., 2023). Perpetrators of CSA were often known to victims and abuse occurred in both physical and online spaces.

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The consequences of CSA were severe, ranging from bodily harm and reproductive health issues to mental trauma, low self-esteem, and social isolation. These effects hinder not only individual growth but also community and national development. In Tanzania, addressing child sexual abuse requires a multifaceted approach involving legal reforms, public awareness, support services, and tackling underlying social and economic vulnerabilities. Despite Acts and policies like the Law of the Child Act No. 21 of 2009 and National Plans of Action (NPA), cases of adolescent sexual abuse continue to rise by up to 30% in some areas (WB, 2022). Harmful social norms, child marriage, early pregnancies, poverty, and limited education partly contribute to this increase. Inadequate funding, weak monitoring, and under-resourced GBV response systems further hinder effective intervention. Local Government Authorities also lack structured education and awareness programmes. When national systems fall short, families become the primary line of defense. With limited external support, they play a critical role in educating children, ensuring safety, and supporting survivors. Raising parental awareness and promoting open communication are essential strategies. However, little is known about how families in urban areas, such as Temeke Municipality, adapt to these challenges, particularly in the face of digital threats and evolving social dynamics. This study aims to address this gap.

Statistics show that nearly 30% of adolescent girls in Dar es Salaam experience sexual violence before the age of 18 (WB, 2022; National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Thus, this study examines family contribution and the effectiveness of current protective measures in preventing sexual abuse among adolescents in Temeke Municipality, Dar es Salaam. It also assesses the long-term impacts of abuse, such as trauma, social withdrawal and fear, which often hinder victims from seeking help (WB, 2022). While some preventive institutions exist, their efforts remain limited in scope and effectiveness. Empirical evidence on family-based prevention remains scarce, especially in the Tanzanian context. Therefore, this study addresses this research gap by exploring how families and digital technologies can be integrated into effective prevention strategies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual abuse is a serious global public health and human rights issue with lasting physical, mental, social, and reproductive consequences (WHO, 2024). Although both male and female adolescents are affected, underreporting, especially among girls, makes it difficult to assess its actual prevalence. Victims often remain silent due to shame, fear, and family concerns. Studies show that about one in five girls experiences sexual abuse by age 17 (Omari, 2022; WB, 2022; WHO, 2024). WHO (2024) also reports widespread coerced sexual contact, while UNFPA (2022) notes that 28% of girls and 13% of boys face sexual violence before age 18. These abuses vary by geographical, cultural, and socio-economic factors, with reporting differences linked to social norms and data challenges. By 18 years, many girls face increased risks of early sexual activity, STIs, substance abuse, truancy, and online dangers. This study focuses on Temeke Municipality and acknowledges limited generalizability.

Globally, about 30% of adolescent girls aged 15 and older have experienced physical or sexual violence, mostly by intimate partners (WHO, 2024). Available studies show that sexual abuse is prevalent in Europe, America, and Africa, though they are underreported due to stigma and delayed disclosure, thus obscuring accurate rates. Reports show that 33% of women have faced sexual violence by a partner since age 15, and in sub-Saharan Africa, 42% report physical or sexual violence during their lifetime (WB, 2022). Gender-based violence affects nearly 45% of adolescent girls, with varying rates across countries (WHO, 2024).

Sexual violence harms girls' mental and physical health and reduces prosocial behaviour (Doerr, 2023). In Africa, data gaps exist as families often hide abuse cases due to stigma, leading to significant underreporting and challenges in addressing the problem (Ifeoma et al., 2021).

Research shows that informed and communicative parents play a key role in preventing sexual abuse, though family involvement remains complex and challenging (Omari, 2017). Tanzania has high rates of sexual abuse, with female prevalence estimates ranging from 2.1% to 68.7% (Selengia et al., 2020; Mkonyi, 2021). Sexual abuse, early sexual initiation, and adolescent pregnancies have risen sharply, with 8,000 cases reported in 2015, a 37% increase (Basic Education Statistics in Tanzania [BEST], 2016; UNICEF, 2017). About 40% of girls aged 15–17 experience physical violence, and 17% face sexual violence (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2018). Despite government efforts, cases continue to rise, mirroring global trends in which females are more affected, although recent data show a high prevalence among males as well. Notably, 56% of reported sexual abuse victims in Tanzania were male students, mostly in primary school (Nyakeke, 2017). Some families also conceal abuse by accepting bribes, worsening the problem. Tanzania's National Plan of Action (2016–2017) emphasizes families, schools, and communities in prevention and response, yet sexual violence remains widespread, requiring stronger survivor support, reporting, and prosecution measures.

Despite ongoing research, adolescent girls affected by sexual abuse continue to receive inadequate attention and support. Between 2018 and 2023, CHANZO (2024) reported 2,382 cases of adolescent sexual abuse, including sodomy involving 287 girls and 214 boys. Ilala Municipality recorded the highest number of cases among girls (105), followed by Temeke (98) and Kinondoni (84). Cultural stigma and fear of family shame deter many victims from reporting abuse to authorities such as the Gender Desk police, leading to widespread underreporting (Omari, 2022). Families often view disclosure as a parenting failure and fear social ostracism or damaged marriage prospects for their daughters. The neglect of sexual abuse research has worsened outcomes for girls, contributing to school dropout, early pregnancy, physical injury, and emotional trauma. In contrast, boys tend to face fewer consequences (Nguma, 2022; Omari, 2022). Many girls experience isolation, anxiety, and shame, and may engage in risky behaviours such as substance use and gambling, which further limit their participation in community life (UNICEF, 2017; Omari, 2022).

Although government and NGO initiatives such as the National Plan on Violence Against Adolescents, the Child Development Law Act No. 21 of 2009, UNICEF guidelines, the National Child Helpline 116, and the Women's Legal Aid Helpline are in place, sexual abuse cases continue to rise. Parents play a crucial role in prevention, yet sociocultural taboos often hinder open discussions within families (Omari, 2017; 2022). Many families still choose secrecy, sometimes arranging early marriages for abused girls. As a result, adolescent girls face academic disruption, school dropouts, and deteriorating physical and mental health. Teenage pregnancy remains a persistent challenge, despite re-entry and alternative education programs like SEQUIP (WB, 2019; Omari, 2022). In some communities, girls report feelings of anger, despair, and hopelessness, thus weakening their protection further.

In Tanzania, the prevention of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) relies heavily on family involvement, yet various challenges hinder its effectiveness. Sociocultural norms and stigma discourage open discussions about sexual abuse, leaving adolescents uninformed and vulnerable. Additionally, the rapid growth of mass media, modern technology, and artificial intelligence has shifted the primary source of information from parents to digital platforms,

where guidance has become misleading or harmful. Although Acts and policies like the National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children (2016-2021) and the Child Development Law Act No. 21 of 2009 (RE 2019) ALTERNATIVE (The Law of the Child Act No. 21 of 2009 (RE 2019) highlight the role of families in protecting children, weak implementation, lack of parental digital literacy, and limited policy enforcement reduce their impact. To strengthen CSA prevention, families must regain their role as primary educators by fostering open communication, improving awareness of digital risks, and ensuring that legal frameworks are effectively implemented to support parental involvement in safeguarding children.

### **2.1. Mass Media, Modern Technology and Sexual Abuse among Adolescent Girls**

In recent years, adolescents have been facing growing threats from Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV), including sexual abuse and revenge porn, which severely affect their mental health (Anderson et al., 2024). Increased access to digital media has introduced new risks by shaping attitudes toward sexuality and enabling new forms of sexual violence. Lack of comprehensive sex education, generational shifts in sexual norms, and exposure to online content further heighten these risks. While women report higher rates of sexual violence, men are also affected, albeit to a lesser extent, with men perpetrating most cases (WHO, 2024). Survivors often suffer lasting psychological, social, and academic consequences.

Hong (2024) notes that smartphones and internet access have both connected and endangered adolescent girls, making them vulnerable to abuse even at home. The fast paced evolution of apps challenges parental oversight, while the interconnectedness of social media increases privacy risks. Adolescent girls, especially impressionable and sensitive to peer pressure, are at a greater risk of online exploitation.

### **2.2. The Role of Family in Preventing Sexual Abuse Among Adolescent Girls**

Buller et al. (2020) emphasize that social norms, beliefs, and attitudes contribute to adolescent girls' vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Families play a key role in countering harmful expectations, such as the normalization of transactional sex, by promoting open communication, self-worth, and education on healthy relationships. Parental supervision and guidance are essential for protecting marginalized girls and strengthening family awareness. This can help to break the cycles of abuse.

Ullman (2020) highlights barriers to disclosing sexual assault, including fear of adverse reactions, lack of support, and gendered family expectations. These factors often silence adolescent girls. However, Ullman's study lacked data on family confidence in preventing abuse, a gap which this study addresses. Similarly, Vyas (2022) found that violence in families and dating relationships increase girls' vulnerability, but the study did not explore preventive roles within families. In Tanzania's cultural context, families are influential in shaping gender roles and can either reduce or reinforce abuse risks. Mwanukuzi and Nyamhanga (2021) also stressed family and community involvement in preventing child sexual abuse (CSA). While families significantly shape attitudes toward consent and protection, few studies have examined how their confidence in safeguarding adolescents affects prevention efforts. This research aims to fill this gap by examining how the family can play a central role in preventing sexual abuse of adolescent girls.

### **2.3. Sociocultural Values and Family Contribution in Preventing Sexual Abuse**

Howard et al., (2021) highlight that sociocultural factors significantly shape how sexual abuse among adolescents is perceived, addressed, and prevented. In societies where discussing sexual matters is taboo or where rigid gender roles persist, educating adolescents on consent and healthy relationships is more difficult. Cultural normalization of coercion further hinders prevention efforts. Similarly, Omari (2022) emphasizes that traditional gender roles influence both the perpetration and reporting of abuse, thus limiting girls' ability to assert boundaries and seek help. These dynamics often marginalize family roles and reduce their effectiveness in protection.

Ullman (2020) adds that family-based sexual education reflects sociocultural values. It improves awareness and reduces stigma. Peer influence also plays a role because adolescents model behaviour tends to be based on group norms. Effective peer education can therefore promote respectful conduct. Omari (2022) and Oswu-Addo et al., (2023) stressed the need to challenge harmful norms, promote open communication, and ensure culturally sensitive legal and community support. Addressing these sociocultural barriers is key to enhancing prevention and protection strategies for adolescent girls (Makoye, 2016; Isangula & Mbelwa, 2017).

### **2.4. Impartation of Knowledge on Prevention of Sexual Abuse among Adolescent Girls**

Howard et al., (2021) found that forced sexual initiation and early sexual debut among adolescent girls were not significantly linked to orphan status, childhood physical violence, or witnessing community violence. Preventing sexual abuse requires a multifaceted approach involving education, communication, empowerment, and systemic support. Reuben et al., (2022) highlighted the role of community-based child protection mechanisms in reducing sexual violence in Rombo District, Tanzania. They stressed the importance of culturally sensitive, age-appropriate sex education covering consent, boundaries, and healthy relationships. However, limited funding and inadequate skills hindered program implementation. Empowering girls with legal knowledge, assertiveness training, and self-defense classes proved effective in prevention and response.

Mtaita et al., (2021) emphasized the value of counseling and peer support in helping girls cope with trauma and build resilience. However, such services were scarce, forcing many girls to depend on family support alone. The authors noted that the lack of collaboration between families, communities, and organizations weakened the prevention efforts. They called for stronger legal frameworks, accessible reporting mechanisms, and resilience-building programs to protect and empower adolescent girls.

### **2.5. Preventive Measures to Prevent Sexual Abuse among Adolescents**

Assini-Meytin (2020) emphasized the importance of teaching adolescents' self-protection and addressing early harmful behaviours to prevent sexual abuse. Similarly, Madrid et al., (2020) found that safe school interventions and mindfulness-based approaches improved awareness, reporting, and reduced dating violence. In Tanzania, Wamoyi et al., (2022) stressed the need for clear definitions of sexual harassment and the value of open parent-child communication about sexual health. Such discussions were linked to delayed sexual initiation, reduced unprotected sex, and lower rates of teenage pregnancy as well as STIs. However, conversations in many families were often limited or delayed, leaving gaps in sexual education.

Wamoyi also noted that supportive family relationships and adherence to traditional norms helped to reduce risky sexual behaviours. Evidence from Uganda showed that strong family bonds and social support lowered intentions of sexual risk-taking among girls. Reuben et al., (2022) called for investment in community-based child protection, while highlighting the vital role of family involvement in ensuring their success. Likewise, Russell (2022) advocated for comprehensive sex education (CSE), demonstrating that it helps adolescents to make safer choices. Russell also stressed that active parental involvement through discussions about consent, boundaries, and respect strengthens adolescents' ability to avoid abuse and it builds resilience within families.

### 3. THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study was grounded on the Social Impact Theory (Latané, 1981), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), and Social Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which together provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the family's role in preventing adolescent sexual abuse. The Social Impact Theory emphasizes the influence of significant sources such as parents on behaviour, highlighting how the strength, immediacy, and number of family interactions can shape adolescents' responses to risk. Social Learning Theory explains how adolescents acquire behaviours and values through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, making the family a key model for teaching personal boundaries, consent, and safe practices. Social Ecological Theory situates the family within broader social, cultural, and economic systems, emphasizing how external pressures such as poverty, harmful norms, and digital exposure interact with family dynamics to either strengthen or weaken protection efforts. One emerging challenge was the influence of digital technologies, mass media, and AI, which can disrupt parent-child communication and expose adolescents to harmful content (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Luperiello et al., 2023). These tools reduce immediacy in familial influence and shift adolescents' leaning toward digital platforms. Globally, families are responding by promoting digital literacy, setting boundaries, and fostering open dialogue interventions that reflect the core principles of all three theories. They also reinforce the importance of active and informed parenting in both physical and digital environments.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of families in preventing sexual abuse among adolescent girls in Tanzania. The design enabled a deeper understanding of social, cultural, and emotional family dynamics often missed in quantitative approaches (Bryman, 2012). The study revealed communication patterns, practices, and contextual factors influencing prevention efforts. The case study method allowed real-life insights into the family's role in child protection (DeJong, 2005). The research was conducted in Temeke Municipality. This study area was selected based on its high prevalence of adolescent sexual abuse—26.1% compared to Kinondoni's 5.6% and Ilala's 5.2% (Tanzania Demographic Health Survey [TDHS], 2016; Japhet, 2019; National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Two wards, Mbagala Kizuiani and Mbagala kwa Azizi Ally, were targeted due to their reported 131 CSA cases (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022; THRR, 2023/24). Cultural attitudes and norms in Temeke offered relevant insights into CSA reporting and management.

Data collection continued until saturation was reached. Twenty purposively selected participants, including adolescent girls aged 12–18 and parents or guardians, were interviewed. All participants gave informed consent (or assent with parental consent for

minors). The exclusion criteria included those outside the age range, lacking relevant experience, or with psychological conditions that could be worsened by participation (Bryman, 2012). In-depth interviews uncovered the motivation, behaviours, and attitudes of families regarding CSA prevention. This approach offered detailed perspectives beyond surface-level data. Ethical standards were strictly observed, confidentiality was maintained, participation was voluntary, and data were used solely for academic purposes.

## 5. FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings on the role of families in the prevention of sexual abuse among adolescent girls. Several factors were identified to have a bearing on how families relate to and support their adolescent girls in fighting against being sexually abused. The factors included mass media, modern technologies, poverty, family practices, and the knowledge imparted to adolescent girls by their families. Findings also highlight challenges such as limited parental involvement and structural barriers that hinder effective family-based prevention. These insights offer a deeper understanding of the family's role in protecting adolescent girls from sexual abuse, and they emphasize the need to strengthen protective practices within households and the broader Tanzanian community. The identified factors and challenges are presented below.

### 5.1. Family Contribution to the Protection of Adolescent Girls

#### 5.1.2. Family Communication, Cultural Norms and the Protection of Adolescent Girls from Sexual Abuse

The findings indicate that families need to be proactive in creating a safe, supportive, and communicative environment so that they can significantly reduce the risk of sexual abuse for adolescent girls. One of the interviewed parents had this to say:

*“... At the beginning, I did not have time to communicate with my adolescent girl... However, I have to set aside time so that I can come early and get in touch with my girl before she goes to sleep. I was trying to use very simple language so that she could understand me well when I communicate with her. I can also allow my adolescent girl to explain things which she does not like and then we agree together to move forward”* (Parent 1, Mbagala Kizuiani ward, 2023).

The above finding indicates that adolescent girls with strong family support, where open communication about boundaries, consent, and sexual health was encouraged, had a lower risk of experiencing sexual abuse. Families that actively engaged (available to children) in open discussions about sexual abuse prevention and created a safe space for their daughters were more likely to intervene early when abuse was suspected. Parents who return home early and have time for discussions with their daughters tend to be more positive in their parenting. Informants, however, observed that cultural practices and social norms regarding gender roles, sexuality, and family privacy increased the risk of abuse, as they discouraged disclosure or created a culture of silence among parents when it came to reproductive health issues. These norms undermined the protective role of families against the sexual abuse of adolescent girls. This was illustrated by one informer who said that:

*“I usually feel shy to explain my things, my personal issues. Since they are my personal issues, I do not feel like sharing them with anyone. If I mention someone, it means I have exposed him. He might find me on the street with his friends and abuse me more... it is better if I keep quiet”* (Adolescent girl 1, Mbagala Kizuiani ward, 2023).

The findings show that adolescent girls often remained silent about sexual abuse due to cultural expectations, fear of shame, or punishment from family members. Some felt unsafe walking alone and asked parents or relatives to escort them to school. The lack of trust and support within the family increased their vulnerability, as girls were less likely to disclose abuse and sometimes sought help from others for psychosocial support. This highlights the critical role of family trust, protection, and open communication in preventing and responding to adolescent sexual abuse.

### **5.1.3. Family Knowledge and Communication on Sexual Abuse Prevention**

The knowledge imparted to adolescent girls about sexual abuse plays a crucial role in prevention, early detection, and response to sexual abuse. Interviews revealed that families that actively educate their children about sexual abuse contribute to increased awareness and empowerment among adolescents. The following quote from an in-depth interview with a parent is illustrative of the above:

*“...getting to know about my daughter was important to me since I was able to be close to her and understand what she was suffering from. When she is abused, I know where to take her and the organization to go for as well, since I know what kind of abuse she was suffering from. This helped me also on how to protect my daughter, especially when she meets different people and when she is alone”* (Parent 2, Mbagala Kwa Azizi Ally ward, 2023).

The excerpt above indicates that family members knew how to protect their children because they were aware of the types of abuse adolescent girls might face when away from home. The study further revealed that families used this knowledge to prepare and guide girls on how to stay safe in such situations. Family members understood the challenges girls encountered and educated them on how to protect themselves from potential abuse. Informants noted that open discussions within the family about body safety, consent, and recognizing inappropriate behaviour helped adolescents to gain confidence to identify and report abuse. When parents or guardians provided accurate information about sexual abuse, adolescent girls were more likely to understand their rights and boundaries, thus reducing their vulnerability. The study also observed that involving families in addressing the challenges faced by adolescent girls strengthened their relationships, making it easier for parents and relatives to pass on important values, norms, and customs essential for the adolescent girls' protection and development.

The informants revealed that efforts to impart knowledge on sexuality often faced challenges. Cultural beliefs and taboos surrounding sexuality influenced how much information was shared within families. In many cases, discussions on sexual topics were limited or discouraged, leaving adolescents uninformed and more vulnerable to abuse. However, the study noted that despite such discussions being viewed as shameful or embarrassing, some families were encouraged to speak openly and educate their adolescent girls about sexual



abuse, thus equipping them with knowledge for self protection. The extent to which this guidance was followed varied, as reflected in the continued rise in sexual abuse cases. Informants emphasized that parental attitudes and awareness greatly affected the effectiveness of these efforts. In reference to the foregoing, a parent informant said:

*“I was able to discover that the attitudes that we parents have can make adolescent girls hide some of the information about sexual abuse. Adolescent girls need time to be close to their parents so the parents can easily explain what they consider unacceptable to the adolescent girls. Sometimes we parents have a **carried attitude**, which is not right when we receive information about sexual abuse. Sometimes we don’t listen to our adolescent girls since we think what they face is done on purpose”* (Parent 1, IDI, Mbagala Kizuiani ward, 2023).

The above quote indicates that parents who were knowledgeable about the risks of sexual abuse and took an active role in educating their children tended to foster a protective environment. The findings indicated that a lack of parental awareness or discomfort in discussing such topics resulted in inadequate education and increased risks for adolescents. Therefore, it was important that parents and family members openly discussed sexual abuse, its warning signs, and prevention strategies, thus helping adolescents navigate potential risks and fostering a culture of safety and trust within the family. The foregoing, however, seemed to ignore the complex nature of the problem of sexual abuse. For example, apart from knowledge, economic hardship was also reported to be one of the factors that engender sexual abuse among adolescents, as explained in the following section.

### **5.2.3. Economic Hardships in Preventing Adolescent Sexual Abuse**

The study found that economic hardship significantly increased adolescent girls’ vulnerability to sexual abuse in Temeke Municipality. Families affected by poverty often faced trauma, divorce, domestic violence, and harsh parenting, which weakened their capacity to offer emotional support and protection. Strengthening family support systems in such contexts was essential for preventing child sexual abuse. These socioeconomic challenges also harmed girls’ physical and mental health and disrupted their education. As one girl shared that her parents’ constant struggle for income left her unsupported and emotionally distressed:

*“... I was confused and depressed when I could not do my assignment due to a lack of proper care from my parents. My parents are too busy looking for money, so sometimes they come back late, or sometimes they come back with nothing... so sad”* (Amina, IDI, Mbagala Kizuiani ward, 2024).

Limited parental care due to financial strain forced many adolescent girls to engage in petty trade after school, thus reducing their study time and increasing their exposure to unsafe environments. One girl explained:

*“... I have to go and sell small things after coming back from school so that I can buy my own things. I have to sell groundnuts and dried fish, even though I’m tired. When I come back home, it’s already late. I am tired and I cannot help my mother well. Really, it is a tough life indeed”* (Amina, IDI, Mbagala Kizuiani ward, 2024).

Moreover, girls from low income households often lacked access to educational resources and parental guidance, making them more vulnerable to abuse. The study also found limited awareness and accessibility of social welfare services, as one girl noted:

*“It is difficult for me to access social welfare services since, first, I don't know about them; secondly, I'm afraid of complaining to them; but also, they are not close to my house, so I cannot go there. I am staying at home and helping my mom with the little things I can do...”* (Habiba, Mbagala Kwa Azizi Ally ward, 2022).

These barriers contributed to missed learning opportunities and increased social isolation. Notably, girls in Mbagala Kwa Azizi Ally faced more pronounced challenges than those in Mbagala Kizuiani. Overall, the findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen family support and economic stability to protect girls from sexual abuse and promote their well-being.

This study found that poor parenting and family tensions, especially in low-income households, created unsafe and stressful environments for adolescent girls. Angry parenting and frequent conflicts limited emotional support, contributing to mental health issues and increased vulnerability to sexual abuse. Economic hardship also led to school dropouts, pushing girls into child labour, petty trade, or risky behaviours such as early sex and commercial sex, exposing them to further abuse and health risks. Moreover, limited access to digital technologies in low-income families reduced girls' exposure to protective resources like online education, counseling, and welfare services. In contrast, adolescent girls from wealthier families benefited from digital learning and support systems. This digital divide left many disadvantaged girls excluded from safety networks and timely interventions.

### **5.3. Preventive Measures to Reduce Sexual Abuse among Adolescents through the Use of Technology, Mass Media, and Artificial Intelligence**

#### **5.4. Mass Media and Modern Digital Technologies**

Mass media and modern digital technologies have a significant influence on adolescents by shaping their thoughts, behaviours, and attitudes. These effects were found to be both positive and negative. On the positive side, digital tools and media platforms offered educational benefits, easier access to information, and a means of self-expression as well as social connection. However, without proper guidance and supervision, they also contributed to increased vulnerability, risky behaviours, and mental health challenges among adolescent girls. This was especially evident in low-income families, where limited parental presence and economic pressures hindered adequate monitoring of children's digital consumption.

The study revealed that open communication between parents and adolescent girls, alongside consistent guidance and digital supervision, played a vital role in protecting girls from sexual abuse and supporting their academic success. Families that were able to utilize modern technologies such as mobile phones, the internet, and mass media responsibly benefited girls from enhanced access to learning materials, awareness of protective services, and improved self confidence. A student informant shared her experience:

*“... I can use my mobile phone with my friends when I go home. I usually use it to share important information with my friends, and sometimes I use it to play different music that I like. You know, I am a good dancer, so I*

*listen to good music so that I can dance well when it's time for competition. But I also use my mobile to read notes from school, chat with my friends, and sometimes I use it to ask questions on Google to get answers to my questions... It is very easy and convenient for me, especially now that I am in Form Three...*" (Farida, IDI, Mbagala Kizuiani ward, 2024).

This quote highlights how access to digital technology, when appropriately guided by the family, can empower adolescent girls educationally and socially. It also demonstrates that family involvement, including education about personal safety, boundaries, and the dangers of online exploitation, was critical in ensuring that adolescents use digital platforms responsibly. Informants emphasized that such efforts must be supported by the availability and involvement of parents, especially in low-income households where digital supervision may be neglected due to financial pressures and overworking.

In poor families, economic hardship often limits parents' ability to supervise or invest in safe digital resources. While digital tools can enhance learning and awareness, the lack of financial capacity to afford smartphones, data bundles, or media literacy training widens the digital divide. This means that while some adolescent girls benefit from mobile-based learning or protective information, others remain excluded due to poverty and inadequate family support. Mass media served as a tool for spreading awareness, advocating for child protection, and encouraging open family discussions on sensitive topics in families that could afford and guide the use of television, radio, or social media. This was echoed by an interviewed informant who said:

*"I also watch television when I am free, but also during weekends. My parents allowed me to watch television only during the weekend. But I also watch it after I come home from school if I do not have homework, or after finishing my homework. My parents watch me, and they usually support me with my homework and watching TV as well"* (Farida, IDI, Mbagala Kizuiani Ward, 2024).

This quote reflects how family contributions, in terms of time and supervision, play a pivotal role in shaping adolescent behavior. Families that actively engage in their children's media use can guide them toward productive and age-appropriate content, which enhances both academic learning and moral development. However, in families strained by poverty, such supervision is often absent. Parents may return home late or remain emotionally unavailable due to stress and fatigue, leaving adolescent girls to navigate digital spaces unsupervised.

*"I use the mobile phone to call my boyfriend, and sometimes I watch TV at midnight. There are some programs which are good, but I watch them at midnight so that my parents cannot see me"* (Farida, IDI, Mbagala Kizuiani Ward, 2024).

This statement highlights the potential risks associated with accessing digital technology without proper guidance. Girls from low-income families, already burdened with economic responsibilities, may misuse technology in ways that expose them to sexual content, predators, or inappropriate peer influence. This further endangers their physical and emotional well-being, especially in the absence of structured family oversight and financial stability.

## 6. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

### 6.1. Family Communication, Cultural Norms, and the Protection of Adolescent Girls from Sexual Abuse

This study found that adolescent girls in Temeke Municipality felt safer and more protected when their families, especially parents, were actively involved in preventing sexual abuse. In contrast, those lacking family care and support faced greater vulnerability. While some families fostered emotional security, trust, and open communication as key elements in reducing sexual exploitation, others focused mainly on basic needs, neglecting emotional and protective responsibilities.

Through the Social Impact Theory, families emerged as the most decisive influence on adolescent behaviour. Where parental involvement was strong, positive outcomes followed; where it was weak or absent, girls were more exposed to harmful external influences, including coercion, STIs, and unplanned pregnancies. Compared to the Social Ecological Theory, which highlights the family as a child's first and most immediate environment, the study showed that when families neglected moral and sexual education, adolescents' microsystems weakened, leaving them unprepared to establish boundaries or recognize abuse. Similarly, the Social Learning Theory explains that adolescents imitate behaviours observed in their environment. Girls without present or involved parents often turned to peers and media for guidance, absorbing distorted messages about relationships and sexuality. This substitution led to risky behaviours, which are contrary to societal expectations.

The findings of the study demonstrate that strong family involvement promotes adolescent safety across all theoretical frameworks. When absent, other influences, often harmful, take precedence. Thus, enhancing parental emotional presence, digital oversight, and open dialogue are crucial in protecting adolescent girls.

### 6.2. Family Knowledge and Prevention of Sexual Abuse Prevention

This study highlights that parents and caregivers play a critical role in educating adolescents about the risks and warning signs of maltreatment, particularly sexual abuse. Preventive efforts are most effective when families engage actively in teaching personal safety, bodily autonomy, and appropriate boundaries. While schools offer Sexual and Reproductive Health Service (SRHS) education, this responsibility must also be shared at home. These findings address the second objective of the study, which aimed to explore the use of technology and family-based strategies to prevent sexual abuse among adolescents. Parents create a protective environment that fosters healthy development and reduces vulnerability to abuse when they provide consistent emotional support, guidance, and digital supervision.

Emerging themes included the protective role of trust, open communication, and moral guidance, contrasted with neglect, emotional absence, and over-reliance on meeting only basic needs. Girls lacking support were more vulnerable to coercion, STIs, and unplanned pregnancies. Across the three applied theories, Social Impact, Social Ecological, and Social Learning, family emerged as the strongest and most immediate influence in preventing sexual abuse. Weak parental involvement consistently exposed girls to harmful peer and media influences, while active parenting fostered resilience, boundary-setting, and healthier relationships. A key theme was the shift from family to digital and peer-based learning when parental guidance was lacking.

The study also notes that traditional rites of passage, such as Unyago for girls and Jando for boys, historically served as community-based frameworks for moral instruction, personal discipline, and sexual responsibility. Although these cultural practices were fading due to modernization, Makoye (2016) and Japhet (2015) add more about the rites that teach adolescents about respectful conduct and community expectations, thereby acting as early preventive tools against sexual abuse. While their relevance in the modern era must be evaluated carefully, their underlying principles remain valuable. These findings underscore the urgent need to strengthen emotional connections, provide consistent guidance, and integrate family involvement in digital supervision and sexual education to help reduce adolescent girls' vulnerability to abuse.

### **6.3. Economic Challenges in Preventing Adolescent Sexual Abuse**

The findings of this study show that poverty significantly influences family dynamics and heightens the risk of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). In low-income households, limited financial resources often hinder parents' ability to provide adequate supervision, education, and emotional support. As a result, adolescents become more vulnerable to exploitation, including early marriage, transactional sex, or exposure to unsafe environments as they seek to meet basic needs like food, shelter, and education. The study revealed that financial hardship not only restricts access to protective information and services but also reduces parental presence and engagement, thereby weakening family protection systems. Moreover, families living in poverty often face barriers in accessing legal and psychological support due to cultural stigma, lack of awareness, or economic constraints.

These findings reflect the principles of the Social Impact Theory, which asserts that the strength, immediacy, and number of influential social sources shape an individual's behaviour. In the context of poverty, parental influence diminishes due to economic strain. Parents are often emotionally or physically unavailable, and their capacity to guide, supervise, or educate is weakened. As this immediate and credible influence fades, adolescent girls become more susceptible to external, and often harmful sources such as exploitative adults, peers, or media. This shift in influence increases their vulnerability to CSA and other risky behaviours.

The study also aligns with the Social Ecological Theory, which views child development as a product of interactions across multiple environmental systems. At the microsystem level, poverty disrupts the family unit's ability to function as a stable support system. This disruption extends into other systems such as schools and communities, where protective structures may also be weak or inaccessible, compounding the risks faced by adolescents. Moreover, the findings support the Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that individuals learn behaviour through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. In impoverished settings, where parental modeling and supervision are lacking, adolescents often turn to peers, media, or social networks for behavioural cues. Without positive role models or guidance, they are more likely to imitate the risky or exploitative behaviours they observe, further increasing their exposure to abuse.

### **6.4. Modern Digital Technology and Mass Media to Adolescent Girls**

This study found that modern technology and mass media play a substantial role in shaping the behaviours, attitudes, and safety of adolescent girls in Tanzania. The provision of education, empowerment, and protection is particularly critical for girls in upper primary (standard six and seven) and secondary school levels. When used responsibly, digital

platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and educational apps provide adolescents with important information on personal safety, reproductive health, and career development. Moreover, technological tools like parental control features and GPS tracking applications enhance physical and digital safety by allowing families to monitor interactions and movements, thereby helping to prevent exploitation. The mass media including television, radio, and online campaigns has also contributed to raising awareness about gender-based violence, digital safety, and legal rights thereby empowering adolescent girls with knowledge to protect themselves.

Comparatively, the study shows that the influence of technology, as explained by the Social Impact Theory, is stronger when paired with active family involvement. Without parental guidance, adolescents are more exposed to misinformation and online risks. Similarly, under the Social Ecological Theory, digital media functions best when reinforced by strong microsystem agents, such as parents and caregivers, providing a consistent message across systems. According to the Social Learning Theory, adolescent girls model behaviours from media and peers. Positive content, reinforced by family discussions, leads to safer choices, while unchecked exposure to harmful content promotes risky behaviour. Across all theories, the effectiveness of digital influence depends on supportive family engagement.

## **7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study reaffirmed the vital role of the family in preventing sexual abuse among adolescent girls. Stable family environments, marked by emotional support and familiarity, help girls to recognize abuse, set healthy boundaries, and stay safe, thus echoing existing literature on the protective value of strong family ties (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Hong & Buller, 2020). However, the study also raised concerns about the declining influence of parents due to rising reliance on mass media, technology, and artificial intelligence, especially as economic and social pressures limit parental engagement. As a result, many girls turn to unreliable digital sources for guidance, often adopting risky behaviours without family oversight. The study argues that families must reclaim their central role as the primary source of protection, education, and socialization. While technology supports this role, it cannot replace the emotional and moral guidance of parents. The findings call for a shift toward proactive, family-centered interventions, including parental education, psychosocial support, and policies that strengthen families and promote work life balance.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study recommends raising awareness about sexual abuse prevention through schools, religious institutions, seminars, marketplaces, and recreational centers. Families should be held legally responsible for safeguarding adolescent girls, and laws against sexual abuse must be strictly enforced. Additionally, digital media, technology, and AI should align with traditional values to foster harmony within families. Adolescent girls should learn to balance modernization with cultural wisdom. Finally, the government should provide psychosocial support to vulnerable girls through social welfare services to ensure their safety and protection.

## **9. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

Sexual abuse remains a taboo topic in many Tanzanian communities, which limited participants' openness due to fear of stigma or legal consequences. The study mainly involved families already informed about child protection, leading to potential bias and excluding marginalized families with limited awareness of prevention strategies.

## 10. AREA FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study found that most research available focused on parents' views, overlooking how adolescent girls perceive their families' protective efforts. Understanding these perspectives is essential. Therefore, further research is needed to explore adolescents' views to identify gaps in parental approaches to preventing sexual abuse.

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