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Characterizing the prevalence and contributing factors of sexual violence: A representative cross-sectional study among school-going adolescents in two East African countries

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual violence against minors is a global phenomenon with wide-ranging negative consequences. Global reports suggest that it is a particularly serious issue in East African countries, although research on prevalence and characteristics of violence in these countries is scarce. **Objective:** The aim of this study was to assess sexual violence and its circumstances among Tanzanian and Ugandan adolescents.

Participants and setting: Two representative samples of secondary school students aged 12–17 from Tanzania and Uganda ($N = 1402$) were included in this study.

Methods: Data assessed using standardized questionnaires were analyzed to determine prevalence, characteristics, and contributing factors of sexual violence among youth.

Results: We found high levels of sexual violence (27.2 %) exceeding global average estimates of under 20 %. Significantly more sexual violence experiences were reported by boys (29.9 %) than girls (24.6 %) and by older compared to younger adolescents (30.2 % vs. 19.6 %). Peers were the most frequent perpetrator group, named by 47.6 % of those reporting abuse. Several potential contributing factors for victimization were identified, such as rural living area, external financial support, and being in a romantic relationship.

Conclusions: Sexual violence is a relevant issue among East African adolescents that occurs in a variety of settings but appears to be most prevalent between peers. Comprehensive sexual education approaches may help to improve the protection of adolescents and to enhance autonomous sexual development.

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1. Introduction

Sexual violence against children and adolescents is a prevalent social and health issue that affects many young people around the world. It is a historically persistent phenomenon that has occurred in all societies during all times (Finkelhor, 1994; Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009; Pinheiro, 2006), and being young is considered a general risk for sexual violence victimization (Jewkes, Sen, & García-Moreno, 2002). Short and long-term consequences of sexual violence in childhood are known to be highly damaging for the affected individuals' physical and mental health throughout the life span (Jewkes et al., 2002; Maniglio, 2009). Examples include sexually transmitted infections (STI) and unwanted early pregnancies (Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001) as well as psychiatric disorders such as depression and traumatic symptoms (Bi et al., 2018; Cutajar et al., 2010). Particularly high rates of stress symptomatology have been connected with abuse perpetrated by offenders close to the child, e.g., parents (Yancey, Naufel, & Hansen, 2013). Other consequences are emotional, behavioral, and sexual problems (Letourneau, Schoenwald, & Sheldow, 2004; Pérez-González, Guilera, Pereda, & Jarne, 2017; Rapsey, Scott, & Patterson, 2019), feelings of shame and a lack of a sense of safety (MacGinley, Breckenridge, & Mowll, 2019). Increased risk of revictimization later in life has also been reported (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010).

Citing internal epidemiological studies, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 20 % of girls and 10 % of boys worldwide experience acts of sexual violence (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002; World Health Organization, 2016). According to three meta-analyses conducted within the past decade, global prevalence estimates vary between 15.0–19.7 % for girls and 7.6–8.0 % for boys (Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, & Tonia, 2013; Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009; Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). Risk of victimization seems to be particularly high in countries in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2014). Sexual violence against minors globally occurs in extreme forms, such as sexual slavery and exploitation, forced underage marriage, and genital cutting, but it is also prevalent in everyday settings such as the home, educational settings, justice systems, and work and community environments (Pinheiro, 2006). Collecting information on the nature and prevalence of these events can be difficult, and underreporting is likely due to numerous reasons related to the topic's sensitivity (Devries et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2014). For one, sexual matters in general are often considered to be taboo, and sexual assaults are a particularly sensitive matter, for girls and boys alike (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019; UNICEF, 2014). Thus, having to answer questions regarding experiences of sexual assault or unwanted interactions might be shameful for the respondents, in addition potentially to evoking unpleasant memories that in many cases have not been articulated before (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Sanjeevi, Houlihan, Bergstrom, Langley, & Judkins, 2018).

1.1. Definitions, circumstances, and consequences of sexual violence against minors

There has been disagreement in the literature about what exact age group the often used term "child/childhood sexual abuse" (CSA) refers to, as some scholars define it as experiences that happen prior to the age of 12, while others use the term to describe unwanted sexual acts before the age of 18 (Assink et al., 2019). Also, there has been ongoing disagreement about whether childhood sexual abuse only includes acts inflicted by an adult, a question impacting research on youth sexual behaviors and experiences in general (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019). Even though research and work on the topic usually refers to children as well as adolescents, that is, to under aged persons in general, the word "child/childhood" in CSA suggests that only very young persons are meant by this definition. In order to avoid misunderstandings in this regard, we refer to the issue with terms such as sexual violence against minors/adolescents that underline that experiences of adolescents by any perpetrators are investigated in this study.

Research scholars (Lalor, 2004; Pinheiro, 2006) indicate that sexual violence against minors is most common within family and household settings and often committed by persons closely known to the victim. Other perpetrators include teachers and other authority figures, as well as peers, as reported by adolescents from several countries including Tanzania and Uganda (UNICEF, 2014). Intimate partners have been identified as perpetrators of many types of violence including sexual acts, especially for girls (Devries et al., 2018). Persons unknown to the victim usually make up only a minority of perpetrators across studies, but have been found to account for the majority of sexual violence against minors in some countries, e.g., Bangladesh and Japan (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). However, most studies on prevalence have not explicitly asked for perpetrators, so reliable global or regional data on perpetrator identities are scarce (Devries et al., 2018). Regarding gender differences in perpetration, research has shown that sexual assaults among adolescents often occur in male-to-female patterns, and that most perpetrators are male (Hamby, Finkelhor, & Turner, 2013). Overall, girls seem to be at greater risk of experiencing sexual violence during childhood and adolescence (Lee, Ryff, & Coe, 2018), but several studies suggest that gender patterns vary in different regions and for different forms. For example, the meta-analysis by Stoltenborgh et al. (2011) found victimization rates of African boys to be double that of other regions of the world. Other possible influencing factors to be considered include certain living and family conditions such as lower socioeconomic status, lower family education levels, and living in more rural areas (Meinck, Cluver, Boyes, & Mhlongo, 2015; Sanjeevi et al., 2018). Those factors often interact and are related to further economic vulnerabilities for youth, such as being financially dependent on external donors and living in a non-nuclear family, that have been associated with experiencing sexual violence (Kidman & Palermo, 2016; Meinck et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2014).

1.2. Sexual violence among children and adolescents in Tanzania and Uganda

Legal age of consent for sexual activities in both Uganda and Tanzania is 18 years, which means that even consensual sex between individuals under the age of 18 is illegal (Kangaude & Skelton, 2018). As mentioned above, childhood and adolescence sexual violence seems to be a particularly prevalent issue in sub-Saharan African countries (UNICEF, 2014). This is also indicated by a recent global

review, which included all types of violence (sexual, physical, emotional) but did not differentiate between different types of violence, reporting a minimum past-year overall victimization estimate of 50 % for African children but no specific prevalence of sexual violence (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress, 2016).

In general, reliable and specific data on sexual violence against youth from East African countries including Uganda and Tanzania are limited. For example, the most recent National Health Surveys from Tanzania and Uganda have included experience of violence, but limit sexual abuse assessment to acts between intimate partners (Government of Uganda, 2018; United Republic of Tanzania, 2016). The study by Hillis et al. (2016) is the only global review on childhood and adolescence violence that includes peer-reviewed studies from Tanzania and Uganda, while the three most recent meta-analyses focusing on prevalence of sexual violence did not include studies from either Tanzania or Uganda (Barth et al., 2013; Pereda et al., 2009b; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). The same applies to the latest review of risk factors for sexual violence against minors, which included no African study at all (Assink et al., 2019). Similarly, a recent literature review on risk and protective factors for physical and sexual violence focusing on African countries did not include any studies from Tanzania and Uganda (Meinck et al., 2015).

While the existing empirical studies on prevalence of sexual violence victimization of children and adolescents in African countries vary greatly in terms of assessment approaches, estimates, quality, and definitions (Badoe, 2017), there are several studies that do report on Tanzania and Uganda and indicate that sexual violence against children and adolescents is a serious issue. For example, data from thirteen sub-Saharan African countries report that about 10 % of girls aged 15–17 years were subjected to sexual violence (Kidman & Palermo, 2016). For Tanzania, a recent study reports a prevalence of 24.7 % for lifetime sexual violence victimization (defined as forced intercourse, attempted forced intercourse or contact abuse) among secondary school students aged 13–24 years (Mwakanyamale, Wande, & Yizhen, 2018). Numbers from the 2009 UNICEF National Survey in Tanzania were similar, with 27.9 % of the female and 13.4 % of the male participants reporting at least one incident of sexual violence before reaching the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2011). Another Tanzanian study found even higher percentages of girls (34.9 %) and boys (21.3 %) under age 18 to be victims of sexual violence defined as forced intercourse or being sexually touched against the will (Vagi et al., 2016).

For Uganda, UNICEF's recent National Violence Against Children Survey reports prevalence estimates of sexual violence during childhood of 35 % for girls and 17 % of boys, with friends and peers as common perpetrators of violence (Ministry of Gender Labor & Social Development, 2018). Similar to Tanzania, the prevalence estimates of sexual violence among secondary school students in Uganda in general has yielded inconclusive findings. In one Ugandan study using a variety of assessment methods including individual structural interviews as well as focus group discussions, 75.8 % of youth aged 8–18 years reported to experience some sort of sexual violence by adults, with 24 % of this abuse occurring exclusively in the school setting. Girls were more at risk of sexual exploitation while boys were vulnerable to forced coitus, inappropriate sexual touching and pornography (Naker, 2005). Another nationwide report assessing past-year prevalence of sexual violence indicates similarly high rates for Ugandan girls (47.8 %) and boys (44.4 %) (Walakira, Ismail, & Byamugisha, 2013). Some other existing qualitative studies from Tanzania and Uganda also indicate prevalent sexual violence among adolescents in the two countries, both among school-going youth and among street children (Lalor, 2004; Muhanguzi, 2011).

1.3. The present study

The indicated high prevalence of sexual violence against minors in Tanzania and Uganda in combination with the paucity of comprehensive research on the topic highlights the necessity of conducting localized studies in order to get a better sense of the characteristics and circumstances of sexual violence in this region. The aim of this study was therefore to fill a gap in the prevalence literature on sexual violence during childhood and adolescence in East African countries by giving a detailed report on the experiences of sexual violence among adolescents in Tanzania and Uganda. The present study hence investigates sexually violent incidents among youth before the age of 18 that were perpetrated by adults, peers, or other minors. Our assessment approach follows the conceptual definition of child/childhood sexual abuse by Mathews and Collin-Vézina (2019) and is based on four criteria: (1) The victimized person is a child (in legal and developmental terms), (2) true consent is absent, (3) the perpetrated act is sexual (including intercourse as well as contact abuse [i.e., physical touching is involved] and non-contact abuse [this can include any sexually encroaching behavior not involving physical touching, e.g., online media exposure of intimate material, verbal defamation or aggression]), and (4) the act constitutes abuse (in terms of power relations, inequality, and exploitation of vulnerability). Comprehensive assessments in Tanzania and Uganda were performed, investigating prevalence of sexual violence, gender and age differences in sexual violence reports, perpetrator characteristics, and potentially contributing factors. Contrary to previous studies often using adults' retrospective reports of sexual violence during childhood (Vagi et al., 2016) we asked adolescents for their experiences from childhood to the time of the study.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design, sampling and procedures

The present study includes data from 1402 adolescents aged 12–17 years from Tanzania ($n = 700$) and Uganda ($n = 702$) who were assessed in two representative surveys conducted in public secondary schools. Data collection in both surveys was performed within the scope of two extensive research and intervention projects with similar designs using cluster randomized controlled trials with the aim to prevent violence against school-going adolescents in Tanzania and Uganda (Nkuba, Hermenau, Goessmann, & Hecker, 2018; Ssenyonga, Hermenau, Nkuba, & Hecker, 2018). In both countries, secondary schools are separated in two levels (the ordinary level

from 8th to 11th grades, and the upper level encompassing 12th and 13th grades). As part of the longitudinal design of the greater research project, only students from 8th and 9th grades were included in the study to allow subsequent follow-up assessments within the same schools (see Appendix for more details). Although the two separate country surveys differed in the level (national in Tanzania vs. regional in Uganda) at which they were representative of school-age youth, we used similar approaches to select our samples. The Tanzanian survey was conducted from March to August 2015 and included a country representative sample of 11 randomly selected coeducational secondary schools from six randomly selected regions of mainland Tanzania (Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Kagera, Kigoma, Iringa, and Lindi). Students of 8th and 9th grades (52.1 % girls) aged 12–17 years were included for participation. The Ugandan survey was conducted from April to November 2017 and included a representative sample of students from 12 randomly selected coeducational secondary schools from six randomly selected districts of the Ankole region in Southwestern Uganda (Ibanda, Isingiro, Kiruhura, Mitooma, Ntungamo, and Mbarara). Students (50 % girls) aged 12–17 years and in their 8th and 9th year of formal schooling in public secondary schools were included in the Ugandan survey.

Sample selection in both countries followed a stepwise process using generated random numbers on each level (regional/district, school, and class levels). Data collections were performed by local assessment teams consisting of psychology researchers and assisting staff trained in data assessment procedures for sensitive topics like violence victimization. Participating students were assessed in gender-separate groups of three to six and were guided through the questionnaires by a trained research assistant of the same gender. To ensure privacy, seating was arranged so that participating students could not see each others' answer sheets. Assessments were conducted within the premises of the participating schools and took about one week per school. In the Tanzanian study, the questionnaires were administered in Swahili language; in the Ugandan study, the language of assessment was English. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, rigorous safety and protection measures for participants were taken, which are explained in detail in the Appendix. For example, in case of critical events such as severe emotional distress during or after the interview or severe cases of ongoing abuse, intervention and support structures were advised in agreement with the concerning adolescent.

For both studies, both parent consent and participant assent were obtained in writing before enrollment in the assessments. Ethical approval for the study procedures in Uganda was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Mbarara University of Science and Technology and the National Council of Science and Technology. Ethical approval for the study conducted in Tanzania was obtained from the University of Dar es Salaam on behalf of Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology. The Ethics Review Board of the University of Konstanz, Germany, provided additional ethical review and approval for both studies. More details on the study's procedures as well as on ethical considerations and measures taken to ensure safety of participants and staff are available in the Appendix, page 7–9.

Table 1
Participants' characteristics.

	Total sample (N = 1402)	Tanzanian sample (n = 700)	Ugandan sample (n = 702)
Gender			
Girls	n = 716 (51.1%)	n = 365 (52.1%)	n = 351 (50.0%)
Boys	n = 686 (48.9%)	n = 335 (47.9%)	n = 351 (50.0%)
Age (in years; range 12–17)	M = 15.21, SD = 1.12	M = 14.92, SD = 1.02	M = 15.51, SD = 1.15
Age groups			
Early adolescence (age 12–14)	n = 398 (28.4%)	n = 248 (35.4%)	n = 150 (21.4%)
Middle adolescence (age 15–17)	n = 1004 (71.6%)	n = 452 (64.6%)	n = 552 (78.9%)
Grade of schooling			
8 th grade	n = 725 (51.7%)	n = 350 (50.0%)	n = 375 (53.4%)
9 th grade	n = 677 (48.3%)	n = 350 (50.0%)	n = 327 (46.6%)
Place of residence			
Urban area	n = 730 (52.1%)	n = 387 (55.3%)	n = 343 (48.9%)
Rural area	n = 672 (47.9%)	n = 313 (44.7%)	n = 359 (51.1%)
Living context			
Live with parents	(84.4 %)	n = 574 (82.0%)	n = 427 (60.8%)
With relatives/guardians	(15.2 %)	n = 124 (17.7%)	n = 101 (14.4%)
In institution	(0.4 %)	n = 2 (.3%)	n = 5 (.7%)
Financial support			
From parents	n = 1212 (86.5%)	n = 588 (84%)	n = 624 (88.8%)
From relatives/guardians	n = 161 (11.5%)	n = 88 (12.6%)	n = 73 (10.4%)
From external source	n = 25 (1.8%)	n = 20 (2.9%)	n = 5 (0.7%)
Are in a relationship	n = 387 (27.6%)	n = 210 (30.0%)	n = 177 (24.2%)
With a peer	n = 346 (25.7%)	n = 172 (24.6%)	n = 174 (23.8%)
With a person >5 years older	n = 41 (2.9%)	n = 38 (5.4%)	n = 3 (0.4%)

2.2. Participants' characteristics

Participating students (51.1 % girls, 48.9 % boys) had a mean age of 15.21 ($SD = 1.12$) years. The majority (71.6 %) were in their middle adolescence (aged 15–17), only one quarter ($n = 398$, 28.4 %) were in their early adolescence (aged 12–14 years). Over one fifth (21.5 %; $n = 154$) of the girls and over one fourth (29.9 %; $n = 205$) of the boys confirmed to be in a romantic or sexual relationship at the time of the study. Most of the students lived with one or two parents (84.4 %), 15.2 % lived with other relatives or other guardians, and 0.4 % lived in a care institution, such as an orphanage. Table 1 displays sociodemographic characteristics separately for the total sample and for the two countries separately.

2.3. Measures

The first part of both the Tanzanian and Ugandan surveys assessed sociodemographic and background characteristics of the participants, such as age, gender, living situation, sources of financial support, relationship status, and whether they go to a school in a rural or urban area. One item was used to assess the participants' main source of financial support, i.e., parents, relatives or an external sponsor like the government or a non-governmental organization (NGO), to reflect socioeconomic status.

The second part of the questionnaires assessed experiences of sexual violence. Analogous to the categorization of sexual abuse of children suggested in the meta-analysis by Barth et al. (2013), the surveys included in this study referred to three different types of sexual violence experienced by minors: 1) forced intercourse (this includes any type of penetrative sexual intercourse), 2) contact abuse (both active contact abuse [being forced to touch someone in a sexual way] and passive contact abuse [being unwillingly touched by someone in a sexual way], and 3) non-contact abuse (defined as unwanted online exposure of intimate pictures or messages). The first two types of sexual violence victimization (forced intercourse, passive contact abuse, and active contact abuse) were assessed with three items adapted from the Maltreatment and Abuse Chronology of Exposure (MACE-20-I; Teicher & Parigger, 2015; see Supplemental Figs. 1 and 2 for details). The MACE-20-I is a valid instrument to assess experiences of violence among children and adolescents that has been used in East African countries before. The three items on sexual violence (e.g., "Has anyone in your whole life touched, fondled, massaged or rubbed your body in a sexual way against your will?") used in the present study had been validated with school-attending children and adolescents ($N > 400$) in Tanzania before (Isele et al., 2020). Items were answered in binary format (yes/no). In addition, in case of experienced abuse, five answer categories were available to indicate possible perpetrators (i.e., parent/adult living in the home, sibling/minor living in the home, other adult, other minor/peer, and relationship partner; see Supplemental Fig. 1).

Experiences from fielding the Tanzanian survey, which was conducted prior to the Ugandan survey, led to amendments in the assessment in Uganda. In addition to forced intercourse, passive contact abuse, and active contact abuse, one item measuring non-contact abuse was now included in the sexual violence questionnaire (i.e., "Has anyone in your whole life exposed nude pictures, videos or intimate messages of you on social media or in the internet to embarrass you?"). Further, the list of answering options in the Ugandan questionnaire was extended to six possible perpetrators for each of the four items, as teachers were added to the list (see Suppl. Fig. 2). The different perpetrator categories were explained to the respondents verbally (see notes to the Supplemental Figures for details). Multiple answers were allowed in case of multiple perpetrators from different perpetrator categories. In both surveys, the experiences were assessed as lifetime experience up to the time of assessment (Fig. 1).

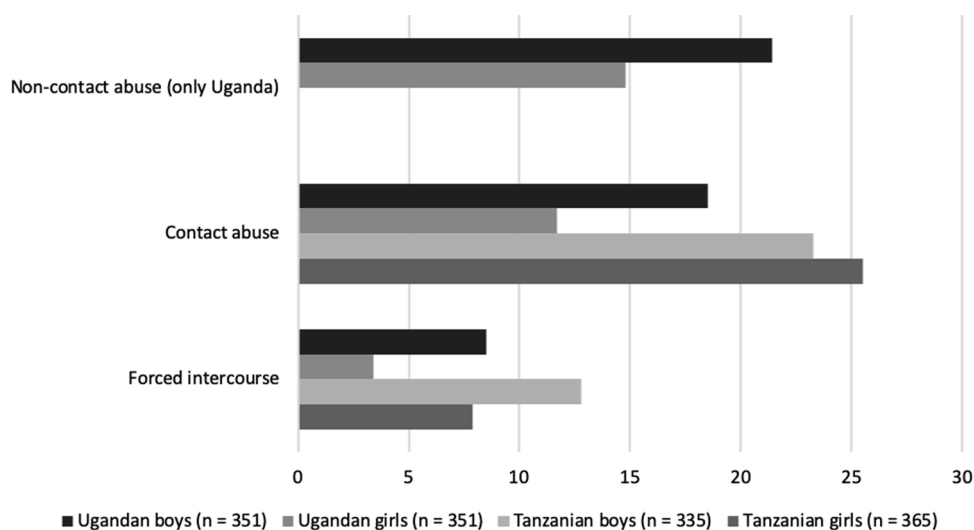


Fig. 1. Percentages of reported experiences of sexual violence among youth from Tanzania (nationwide) and Uganda (Ankole region), in percent. Contact abuse here includes both active and passive contact abuse.

2.4. Data analysis

Prevalence of sexual violence experienced by the participating minors was calculated using descriptive analyses. Group differences for prevalence between gender and age groups were determined with chi-squared tests. To determine possible contributing factors for sexual violence, three multiple logistic regression analyses were conducted producing odds ratios with 95 % confidence intervals and alpha levels of .05. In each regression model, country was included as a covariate, and six variables (i.e., the respondent's gender, current age, location of residence, living with parents, receiving external financial support, and relationship status) were entered simultaneously as binary predictors. Report of any kind of sexual violence (contact abuse and/or forced intercourse, excluding non-contact abuse; model 1), of contact abuse (active and/or passive; model 2), and of forced intercourse (model 3) were the three outcome variables. The outcome variables were binary coded; no abuse was coded 0 and reported abuse was coded 1 in each regression model. Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 25.

3. Results

3.1. Prevalence of sexual violence experiences

Sexual violence victimization of any kind was reported by 381 (27.2 %) of all participating adolescents. Overall levels were similar for Ugandan (27.6 %, $n = 194$) and Tanzanian adolescents (26.7 %, $n = 187$) in this study. However, in the sample from Uganda, this number also includes incidents of media-related non-contact abuse (exposure of nude photos, etc.) while the Tanzanian sample includes only contact abuse. The Ugandan prevalence drops to 16.4 % ($n = 115$) if the item for non-contact abuse is excluded.

The most common type of sexual violence reported across samples was passive contact abuse (i.e., being unwillingly touched by someone), the least common type was forced intercourse. As displayed in Fig. 1 and Table 2, Tanzanian adolescents, boys and older adolescents reported higher levels across all types of sexual violence. The gender difference was significant across the whole sample and for the Ugandan sample separately (see Suppl. Table 1 for detailed numbers). Across both countries, the gender difference reached significance for all types of sexual violence except for being unwillingly touched. Older adolescents reported significantly more unwanted sexual experiences in terms of active contact abuse and forced intercourse, but not regarding passive contact abuse and non-contact abuse (see Table 2).

Detailed information on overall prevalence numbers as well as for each abuse type separated by country, gender, and age groups can be found in the Supplementary Tables 1 through 5 in the Appendix.

Table 2

Rates of sexual violence reported by the participating adolescents including country, gender, and age differences.

	Total ($N =$ 1402)	Tanzanian adolescents ($n = 700$)	Ugandan adolescents ($n = 702$)	Country comparison Chi-square	Boys ($n =$ 686)	Girls ($n =$ 716)	Gender comparison Chi-square	Age 12–14 ($n =$ 398)	Age 15–17 ($n =$ 1004)	Age group comparison Chi-square
Any sexual violence ¹	21.5 % (302) [27.2 % (381)]	26.7 % (187)	16.4 % (115) [27.6 % (194)]	22.14*** [0.15 ($p =$.70)]	23.5 % (161) [29.9 % (205)]	19.7 % (141) [24.6 % (176)]	2.96 [†] [4.98 *]	15.6 % (62) [19.6 % (78)]	23.9 % (240) [30.2 % (303)]	11.69** [16.13***]
Passive contact abuse ²	15.9 % (223)	22.4 % (157)	9.4 % (66)	44.47***	15 % (103)	16.8 % (120)	0.80 ($p =$.37)	14.6 % (58)	16.4 % (165)	0.74 ($p =$.39)
Active contact abuse ³	10.3 % (145)	11.1 % (78)	9.5 % (67)	0.97 ($p =$.33)	14 % (96)	6.8 % (49)	19.32***	5.5 % (22)	12.3 % (123)	13.89***
Forced intercourse ⁴	8.1 % (114)	10.3 % (72)	6% (42)	8.6**	10.6 % (73)	5.7 % (41)	11.33**	4.5 % (18)	9.6 % (96)	9.69**
Non-contact abuse ⁵	9.1 % (127)	–	18.1 % (127)	–	10.9 % (75)	7.3 % (52)	5.09*	5% (20)	10.7 % (107)	2.91 ($p =$.09)

Note.

¹ This excludes non-contact abuse, which was only assessed in the Ugandan sample. The lower number [in brackets] each refers to reports of any sexual violence including non-contact abuse (media exposure etc.) as assessed among Ugandan adolescents.

² Passive contact abuse means to being unwillingly touched by someone in a sexual way).

³ Active contact abuse means being forced to touch someone in a sexual way.

⁴ Forced intercourse means any type of penetration (vaginal, anal, oral).

⁵ Non-contact abuse means unwanted online exposure of own nude pictures, videos, or intimate messages on social media / internet). Non-contact abuse was only assessed in the Ugandan sample ($n = 702$).

[†] $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

3.2. Perpetrators of sexual violence against minors

When asked to identify the perpetrators of sexual violence, participants in this study most frequently named peers (12.5 %) across all abuse types (see Supplementary Tables 1–5). Peers were reported most frequently as perpetrators by both Tanzanian and Ugandan participants of both genders and age groups and for all four analyzed types of sexual violence. The lone exception was active contact abuse among respondents from Uganda, where romantic partners (3.8 %) were named slightly more often as perpetrators than peers (i. e., friends, classmates, playmates or other youth of the same age group; 3%). Siblings were the second most frequently reported perpetrator group for Tanzanian adolescents, and partners for Ugandan adolescents. Parents were named the least frequent perpetrators for any sexual violence, being identified, on average, by 1.4 % of all participants. However, parents were named by Ugandan students to be among the most frequent perpetrators of non-contact abuse (4.7 %), following peers (5%). Perpetration by teachers, which was only assessed among Ugandan adolescents, was reported by 2.7 %. Please refer to Supplementary Tables 1 through 5 for more details on the frequencies of all different forms of reported perpetration of sexual violence against minors separated by country, gender, and age group.

3.3. Potentially contributing factors of sexual violence

Table 3 displays the results of three multiple logistic regression models determining associations of students' personal characteristics with experiences of any kind of sexual violence (excluding non-contact abuse; model 1), contact abuse (model 2), and forced intercourse (model 3). With regard to any kind of sexual violence, older adolescents, those living in rural areas, those being financially supported by external sources, and those being in a romantic or sexual relationship were significantly more likely to report abuse (see Table 3 for details). Being male and not staying with one's parents increased the odds to be exposed to any kind of sexual violence slightly but not significantly. For contact abuse (being unwillingly touched or having to touch another person) the pattern was similar, except that the location factor (i. e., rural vs. urban living environment) did not reach significance. External financial support and being in a relationship showed the highest associations with experience of contact abuse. Receiving finances from external donors rather than from relatives or guardians and being in a relationship both increased 3 times the likelihood of contact abuse.

For forced sexual intercourse, by contrast, rural location was a significant predictor, as was male gender and older age, with all three characteristics almost doubling the odds for reporting rape experiences. In addition, those being in a relationship were four times more likely to report forced intercourse. The consistently increased risk for sexually violent experiences when in a relationship was also significant across genders.

4. Discussion

The present study using representative samples of secondary school students sheds light on experiences of sexual violence among

Table 3
Odds ratios (95 % CIs) of sexual violence in multiple logistic regression models with country as covariate.

Variable	Model 1: Any type of sexual violence				Model 2: Contact abuse (active and/or passive)				Model 3: Forced intercourse			
	B	SE	OR	95 % CI	B	SE	OR	95 % CI	B	SE	OR	95 % CI
Gender (boy vs. girl)	.13	.14	1.14	[0.87, 1.49]	.04	.14	1.04	[0.79, 1.38]	.54	.21	1.72*	[1.13, 2.61]
Age group (Middle vs. Early adolescence)	.51	.17	1.66*	[1.20, 2.31]	.35	.17	1.42*	[1.02, 1.98]	.69	.28	1.99*	[1.15, 3.49]
Location (rural vs. urban)	.30	.14	1.35*	[1.03, 1.76]	.25	.14	1.28 [†]	[0.97, 1.69]	.67	.21	1.95**	[1.29, 2.96]
Living with parents ¹ (no vs. yes)	.08	.18	1.08	[0.76, 1.55]	.16	.19	1.17	[0.81, 1.69]	-.44	.33	0.64	[0.34, 1.23]
Financial support extern (yes vs. no)	.99	.42	2.69*	[1.18, 6.17]	1.12	.42	3.06**	[1.34, 7.02]	-.50	.77	0.61	[0.14, 2.71]
In romantic/sexual relationship (yes vs. no)	.92	.14	2.51***	[1.90, 3.33]	.93	.15	2.54***	[1.90, 3.38]	1.38	.21	3.98***	[2.64, 5.99]

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficients; SE = standard error; OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. Predictor variables were entered simultaneously in each logistic regression model. Outcome variables were coded binary: In each model, no abuse was coded 0, and for model 1 report of active and/or passive contact abuse and/or forced intercourse, for model 2 report of active and/or passive contact abuse, and for model 3 report of forced intercourse were coded 1, respectively. Binary predictor variables were coded as follows: gender: boy = 1, girl = 0; age group: middle adolescents = 1, early adolescents = 0; location: rural = 1, urban = 0; living with parents: no = 1, yes = 0; receiving external financial support: yes = 1, no = 0; being in a romantic/sexual relationship: yes = 1, no = 0.

¹ Living with at least one parent.

[†] $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

adolescents in Tanzania and Uganda. Findings highlight the high prevalence during childhood and adolescence, as over a quarter of the participating students reported the experience of any kind of sexual violence in their lifetime. This level exceeds the prevalence estimates for African countries reported by two meta-analyses, which are estimated at around 15.0–19.7 % for girls and 7.6–8.0 % for boys (Barth et al., 2013; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), but is similar to the findings described in a recent violence study for Tanzania (Mwakanyamale et al., 2018). Older adolescents (aged 15–17) reported experiences of sexual violence significantly more often than their younger counterparts (23.9 % vs. 15.6 %). One reason for this age difference may simply lie in the fact that older adolescents had more opportunities to have any kind of experience, including sexual acts, due to their lived years. Also, being older usually trends with more curiosity and activity regarding sex as well as with peer pressure which also increases the possibility for unwanted sexual encounters. This seems particularly relevant with regard to our findings of the most frequent perpetrators being peers with whom the victims do not have intimate relationships. Although there does not seem to be a clear linear association between age and sexual victimization across studies, age has been reported to be a significant factor in several ways (Finkelhor, 1993; Meinck et al., 2015). However, it must be noted that the time of the occurrence of sexual violence was not assessed in this study. As a result, we cannot determine whether the difference between age groups might be a cohort effect. Furthermore, we cannot rule out the possibility of reporting biases, as older adolescents may be more familiar with talking about sexual issues in general which might make them less afraid to report also unwanted experiences.

The higher rates reported by boys as compared to girls in this study was a surprising finding which runs contrary to global rates where girls are generally more exposed to sexual violence, but has been reported in similar ways by previous studies on childhood sexual abuse in African countries where comparably high victimization rates were reported among boys (Richter et al., 2014; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), including for forced intercourse in Tanzania (Wubs et al., 2009) and Uganda (Naker, 2005). Similar gender differences have also recently been reported in Turkey (Koc et al., 2018) and some Arab countries (Al-Eissa et al., 2016; Usta & Farver, 2010) where one explanation given is that boys are less protected than girls by their families. The gender difference might further be related to age, as a recent study reported that risks of sexual violence victimization increased with age for boys but not for girls (Stark et al., 2019). However, in light of the generally higher rates of violence victimization of women and girls, gender-related biases need to be considered that might lead to underreporting in girls. The silence around sexual abuse may affect girls more than boys, as girls may face more negative consequences due to gender norms, such as stigmatization by the community and reduced marriage prospects (Boudreau, Kress, Rochat, & Yount, 2018; Kelly et al., 2012), and they might expect less support or even disbelieve from adults and authorities due to their inferior social status (Muhanguzi, 2011).

Noteworthy in the sample from Ankole region in Uganda, the most common experience of sexual violence was non-contact abuse in terms of online media exposure, a form of violence that is increasing in schools as well as other contexts. A shift towards media- and internet-related forms of sexual violence in the Ugandan sample may at least partly explain the high prevalence, as (mobile) internet use has been on the rise among African youth within recent years (Wyche & Olson, 2018). This finding highlights the relevance of media-related forms of sexual violence to be investigated further. Future research should include non-contact abuse also in Tanzania to make direct comparisons between East African countries possible.

Looking at the reports regarding perpetrators in this study, it becomes evident that the setting in which many of the sexual assaults occurs seems to be predominantly shaped by interactions among peers and between romantic partners. This is a global tendency among adolescents (Devries et al., 2018), which has also been found in studies conducted in Tanzania and other African countries before (Stein & Bockwoldt, 2016; Vagi et al., 2016). Given that abuse by peers in this study refers to any unwanted sexual act by a peer not considered a romantic partner, and that abusive partners may be from the same or a different age group than the victim, our findings are particularly noteworthy in the light of deficient legal recognition of consensual sex between adolescents. To date, any sexual acts among persons under the age of 18 are criminalized in Uganda and Tanzania, thus impeding any opportunity for consent. As a result of the secret nature of the legally forbidden encounters between adolescents, open communication (e.g., with guardians) is hindered and insecurity about what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable behavior increases. Social pressure to be sexually active may further increase the likelihood for adolescents to cross lines (Kangaude & Skelton, 2018). Similar to previous research among school students in Tanzania (Stein & Bockwoldt, 2016), this study found sexual abuse by teachers as assessed in the Ugandan sample to be least frequent compared to other perpetrators. However, there is a possibility that incidences of abuse by authority figures might be underreported, as children with such experiences might feel less free to talk about it for fear of adverse consequences. Reporting of abuse may also be impacted by the role of parents and guardians in terms of their awareness and attitudes: A culture of silence around sexual matters and abuse prevalent in many East African societies may inhibit disclosure of incidents as well as support for victims (Boudreau et al., 2018; Fontes & Plummer, 2010).

Next to being older and being a boy, living in rural areas, receiving financial support from external sources and being in a relationship increased the risks of experiencing sexual violence in this sample. Being in a relationship was a significant associative factor across all forms of abuse. This finding is in line with global sexual violence research indicating that sexual assaults often occur within intimate relationships (Devries et al., 2018). The finding that external financial support is also associated with a higher probability of sexual victimization is consistent with previous findings that show that living in a non-nuclear family, receiving external financial support, being an orphan or living in institutional care settings are related with higher sexual victimization (Kidman & Palermo, 2016; Meinck et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2014). The identified contributions of age, living area, socioeconomic status, and relationships thus seem to be intertwined in their contribution to sexual violence, and future studies should look into interacting effects against the background of gender inequalities.

4.1. Strengths and limitations

In light of the apparent paucity of comprehensive studies on sexual violence among minors in African countries (Barth et al., 2013; Pereda et al., 2009a; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), this study provides information relevant to addressing the gap in the extant abuse literature. Large representative samples from two East African countries were used to assess the magnitude, including characteristics and contributing factors of abuse. While previous studies utilized retrospective reporting by adults (Vagi et al., 2016), we asked for adolescents' experiences, enabling near-term and concurrent recall of the violent incidents. In response to previous research noting that the method of face-to-face interviews has been criticized for having some limitations in regard to fostering disclosure of experiences of sexual violence in Tanzanian youth (Barr et al., 2017), we used a guided assessment method for data collection. However, needing to have small groups of interviewees due to organizational and time constraints might have had an effect on disclosure as well. By seating them separately with an interviewer of matched gender present to attend in case of any concerns or questions, we made every effort to ensure that the students felt safe and undisturbed while filling out the questionnaires.

Of further note is the fact that this study does not provide a full scope on prevalence in terms of retrospective accounts of experiences before the age of 18 (Pereda et al., 2009a), but asks adolescents of differing ages on victimization until the time of assessment. This implies that older adolescents in this survey might report higher rates due to the greater number of years reported, which might skew the frequency results (Fan et al., 2016). That said, we also cannot be sure that lower reporting rates in some subgroups of the sample reflect actual rates of experiences due to the possibility of reporting biases for which we could not control via study design or analysis. The cross-sectional design also rules out the assumption of causality between the associations found. Further, the distinction of abuse types in this study is limited. With regard to forced intercourse, our assessment approach did not allow for separate reports of different types of penetration (i.e., vaginal, anal or oral). Our interpretations regarding the contexts of this abuse thus remain hypothetical. Also, age at time of the experience, time, and duration of the abuse were not assessed, so we cannot explain from our data whether victimized adolescents were affected by repeated or long-term sexual exploitation.

The present study could rather be considered an effort to generate a representation of the overall prevalence of sexual violence in Tanzania and Uganda grounded in the experience of children and adolescents. However, the study's findings should be interpreted while keeping in mind that the two subsamples were not equivalent. While the Tanzanian data come from a country-wide sample, the Ugandan data were collected in Ankole Region only. The sample from Uganda can thus be regarded representative for school-attending adolescents in that region, but generalizations of the findings across the country need to be done with reservations. However, as indicated by a previous regional study among primary school children in the Central Region of Uganda (Clarke et al., 2016), we expect levels of sexual violence to be similar in other regions of Uganda, which is yet to be confirmed by studies including secondary school students. Furthermore, the fact that the samples did not include students who dropped out of school makes an underestimation of violence rates likely, particularly since those early school leavers might belong to highly vulnerable groups in terms of economic status or early pregnancy probability. Perpetrators' age, gender, and other personal characteristics were also not assessed in the present surveys, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions on the adolescents' relationships with their abusers. Male-to-female patterns have been found predominantly in sexual assaults among US-American youth (Hamby et al., 2013), but comparable research distinguishing between different violent acts is needed for East African countries. Further, more information on intimate partners would have been useful to extend the understanding of abusive relationships in the context. Previous research indicates that relationships in rural African areas where young women face poor educational and economic perspectives might be embedded in a context of structural and interpersonal violence as girls are sometimes forced to engage with older men due to economic and social pressures or through violent threats (Hoss & Blokland, 2018; Leclerc-Madlala, 2019; Tener, 2019). Future studies should thus include the assessment of relationship characteristics.

4.2. Social and practical implications

The findings of this study raise several further questions regarding sexual violence specifically and sexuality and sexual matters among adolescents in East Africa and similar contexts in general.

In light of identified perpetrator identities and risk factors of sexual violence victimization, more attention may need to be directed toward the peer and relationship context. One reason for these widespread problematic approaches to sexual behaviors among adolescents that may make violence more likely to occur might be a lack of information and educational background in sexual matters. Sexual education enhancing free sexual development is a human right, but remains deficient in many settings around the world (World Health Organization, 2018). The topics of adolescent sexuality and related health issues, in particular, have been neglected in broader discourse around global development (Greene, Perlson, Hart, & Mullinax, 2018; Morris & Rushwan, 2015). The high prevalence of STI and unwanted pregnancies in many eastern and southern African countries, including Uganda and Tanzania (Government of Uganda, 2018; United Republic of Tanzania, 2016), have led campaigns and authorities in these societies to focus mainly on the health issues related to sex. Sexual activity is thus associated mainly with infections and negative impacts, which is not surprising in settings with insufficient reproductive health services. The paucity of services available certainly plays a role in the detrimental consequences of STI and early pregnancies experienced in these regions, including health complications, social isolation, and school dropout (Ernest, Otoo-Oyortey, Gebreegziabher, & Mtengeti, 2018; Watson, Bantebya, & Muhanguzi, 2018). This negative perspective in combination with a legislative framework which criminalizes sexual activities between minors may continuously reinforce the taboos around sex. Widespread attitudes in African societies emphasizing abstinence instead of positive approaches to sexuality impede free and open communication between educators and youth as well as between adolescents (Browes, 2015). For example, teachers in Uganda have reported difficulties when attempting to integrate comprehensive and mandatory school-based sexual education into their curriculum

due to conflicting cultural and religious schemas of sexuality (de Haas & Hutter, 2019). As a result, adolescents' fears and insecurities often go unaddressed, which may play a role in increasing the likelihood of non-consensual acts and abuse among adolescent peers.

In light of the described paucity of existing educational strategies, it seems crucial to promote positive and comprehensive sexual education enhancing adolescents' autonomy around their own sexuality. Schools would appear to provide ideal locations in which to implement educational interventions. However, given the complexity of the issue it seems necessary to include stakeholders within the wider community in order to challenge entrenched cultural norms and to achieve long-lasting changes that are responsive to the cultural and historical values of the community (Browes, 2015). Collaborations between schools and existing awareness organizations such as the Femina Health Information Project (Femina HIP) that has been active in Tanzania for over 20 years (Femina HIP, 2018), may offer an example of a promising start. Supporting open communication within families and communities, especially in cases of family abuse, may also help to alleviate the occurrence and impacts of sexual violence.

In order to develop comprehensive intervention approaches targeting sexual violence among minors both generally as well as in its specific forms (e.g., abuse in peer groups, in age-disparate relationships or online abuse), future research should ask for detailed characteristics of the abuse situations, including information on the gender and age of the persons involved, as well as the temporal nature of the abuse (e.g., ongoing vs. discrete events). Furthermore, children and adolescents' actual states of knowledge regarding sexuality must also be assessed in order to tailor culturally accessible and appropriate education approaches. We also recommend that comprehensive research seek to integrate research on sexual violence specifically with research on related social factors, such as gender inequalities and power relations. Next to strengthening educational approaches, immediate measures must be undertaken to actively protect children and adolescents from sexual violence in all settings. Focus should be placed on prevention policy implementation and installing community-based child protection systems both in schools and in other areas of youth's daily lives. This includes improving access to adequately trained health care professionals and social workers as well as sexual violence health promotion campaigns (Badoe, 2017). Given the numerous challenges to understanding and preventing sexual violence against minors in East Africa, it will take actions and engagement at all levels of society in order to ensure peaceful and self-determined sexual development of younger generations.

5. Conclusions

Sexual violence against minors is a critical yet understudied issue in East Africa. The present study revealed high prevalence rates of sexually violent experiences among adolescents in Tanzania and Uganda. Our results point to a remarkably troubling level of sexual violence between peers. These findings suggest relevant issues regarding sexual behaviors among East African minors, and point toward the necessity of multi-level ecological approaches to target social attitudes and lack of protective systems with the aim to enable autonomous and peaceful sexual development.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104711>.

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