

## Original Research Article

## Reported Reasons Why Women and Girls Engage in Female Same-Sex Sexual Behaviors and Practices in Tanzania: Key Informant Qualitative Study Findings

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**Abstract:** There is limited understanding on female same-sex sexual relationships development in Tanzania. This study documents perceived reasons for female same-sex sexual relationships in Tanzania. Conducted a cross-sectional descriptive formative study in Dar es Salaam. Women who have sex with women (SSW) were recruited through snowball sampling and WSW's organization leaders, community members were purposely recruited. Qualitative methods used to collect data: in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), collecting WSW's life stories and observations of female same-sex sexual relationship-related issues. Twelve WSW participated in each FGD. We conducted IDIs with eight WSW, three with WSW's organizations leaders, three with community leaders and one with a male (businessman) community member. Three leaders of groups supporting WSW were interviewed three times each to clarify on issues that emerged from IDIs, FGDs and observations. We applied thematic approach where open systematic coding of data in the participants' language and combining emerging emic concepts with preconceived theoretical constructs was used. Thirty-nine individuals participated in this study. Reasons for developing sexual attraction between and among women included biological orientation, poverty, peer pressure, eroding African social norms and values, globalization and paid sex among women. Tanzanians hold varied reasons behind development and evolution of female same-sex relationships that have implications to the WSW's health and well-being. We recommend for larger ethnographic and multidisciplinary studies, and nationally representative samples to assess the genetic, individual and socio-environment factors influencing onset and evolution of female same-sex sexual behaviors and practices in Tanzania.

**Keywords:** Women who have sex with women, female same-sex sex, female sexuality, sexual orientation, women's sexuality, qualitative research, Tanzania.

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## INTRODUCTION

A same-sex sexual relationship is a connection between persons of the same-sex and can take many forms, from romantic and sexual, to non-romantic homosocial-close relationships [1]. The term is primarily associated with gay/homosexual and lesbian relationships. Same sex-marriage refers to "the institutionalized recognition of such relationships in the form of a marriage; civil unions; may exist in countries where same-sex marriage is not allowed..." [1].

Researchers have reported different reasons why females embrace homosexuality and that like

heterosexual relationships, female same-sex sexual relationships could start in any favorable context: boarding schools, colleges, restaurants, bars, markets/malls, social events or gatherings, camps/trips, at 'All Female Parties' [2, 3] or after substance use [4-6]. However, there is limited understanding on how female same-sex sexual relationships start and develop in developing countries and Tanzania, in particular.

Research focusing on the psychodynamic aspects of homosexuality, for example, have found that lesbians have poorer relationships with both parents, experience more inter parent friction and less family

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security, feel less feminine, and are less accepting of the feminine role than heterosexual women [7]. Other researchers [8, 9] use the 'sexual fluidity theory' arguing that one's (females or men's) sexuality is ever changing along the life spectrum. That is, one's thoughts, feelings, and attractions can be continuously evolving [10]. Sexual attraction, therefore, is not (always) confined to one label, hence, the preference of the label of sexually fluid versus lesbian, bisexual and WSW ones.

Unlike men, depending on the circumstances, a woman might feel attracted to either a man or a woman, and therefore, women are more sexually fluid than men [11], could be attracted to any gender or genders in their lifetime. A clinical psychologist [12] observed, "I feel that most people's identities are evolving all the time, including sexuality. Everyone changes and unfolds over time — we grow, learn about ourselves, age, find allies and the support to become more at home in ourselves. In that sense, the idea that people have some fluidity is obvious." In this paper, therefore, we present reported reasons why women engage in female same-sex sexual behaviors and practices or sexual relationships in Tanzania.

## METHODOLOGY

Researchers conducted a cross-sectional descriptive formative study in Ilala, Kinondoni and Ubungo districts of the Dar-es-Salaam region, Tanzania between January and February 2021. The researchers purposely selected Dar-es-Salaam region because it is the largest commercial city in Tanzania, hosting people from diverse backgrounds, lifestyles and presenting wide range of sexual behaviors and practices [13]. Dar-es-Salaam region, therefore, allowed access to study participants.

Researchers used snowball method to recruit WSW aged 18 and above, had stayed in Dar-es-Salaam for six months or more; have had sexual/physical attraction to other women, and had engaged in same-sex sex in the past year. Researchers used purposeful sampling method to recruit community leaders, community members and underground-operating NGOs' Managers supporting sexually minority groups assumed knowledgeable of female same-sex sexual activities in their areas. All potential WSW contacted, willingly accepted to participate in this study.

Researchers used four qualitative methods: FGDs with WSW; IDIs with WSW and community leaders/members; observation and documentation of WSW's life stories on motives, historical perspectives and same-sex sex experiences. The four methods enabled the researchers to understand, recognize and appreciate female same-sex sexual behaviors and practices from the WSW's perspective. Researchers interacted with study participants in Kiswahili the national and common language in the study area. The

average duration of the FGDs and IDIs was one and half hours. However, as participants had interest in this study, some FGDs and IDIs took longer time, up to two hours. With participants' permission, all FGDs, IDIs and life stories were audio recorded.

Twelve WSW participated in each of the two FGD; each conducted by the three research assistants (RAs). The RAs conducted FGDs in all-WSW supporting NGOs or in places perceived convenient to the WSW invited to participate in the group discussions. The recorder took short notes on emerging key issues to supplement recorded information.

Female same-sex is illegal in Tanzania making discussion around it sensitive that individuals would hesitate talking about openly. Researchers used IDIs to gather personal information created within and outside the WSW's- defined world: eight with WSW; three with community leaders, one with a male community member, and three with WSW- supporting NGOs' Managers. The researchers conducted initial interviews with three leaders of WSW's organizations supporting all-WSW groups [14, 15]. Through these initial interviews, researchers were able to identify FGDs participants. Researchers interviewed three NGOs' Managers supporting three times each to clarify on issues that emerged from IDIs, FGDs and observations.

Researchers conducted observations to learn what life feels like for an "insider" while remaining, inevitably, "outsiders." The researchers recorded observation as much detailed as possible. Researchers used data from observations to: facilitate developing positive relationships (rapport) among researchers and key informants, stakeholders, and gatekeepers, whose assistance and approval were needed for this study; identifying and gaining access to potential study participants; improving the IDI and FGD guides and facilitating the interpretation of data collected through discussions and interviews, thus, ensuring study trustworthiness.

Researchers collected life-stories of three WSW: one transgender man on hormonal treatment, one tomboy and Manager of NGO supporting WSW; and one WSW engaging in sex work with both men and women. Life stories allow the researcher to explore a person's micro-historical experiences within a macro-historical framework to understand an individual's current attitudes and behaviors and how they may have been influenced by initial decisions made at another time and in another place [16]. Data from life stories enabled capturing personal experiences in the WSW's-defined and external worlds.

Researchers selected and trained three female RAs to assist in some aspects of this study: data collection and transcribing recorded interviews. The RAs held first degrees in social sciences and

experienced field researchers. Researchers trained the RAs for five days to orient them on the objectives and procedures for this study. In addition, the RAs were made aware of the vulnerability of WSW and exposed to proper interaction and interviewing procedures.

The RAs transcribed recorded IDIs, FGDs and life stories verbatim. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis approach by applying five stages according to Braun and Clarke [17] to establish meaningful patterns: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes and presenting the results; where open systematic coding of data in the participants' language and combining emerging emic concepts with preconceived theoretical constructs. Nvivo 12 version computer software was used to aid data analysis process.

Researchers obtained research clearance for the study protocol from Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) Institutional Review Board (IRB). District Administrative Secretaries (DAS) granted permission to collect data needed in their respective areas. Street authorities, managers of NGOs/institutions caring for WSW granted permission to conduct the study in their respective areas and institutions. The process of interacting with the study participants had no harm to them and we kept their story telling to only needed information.

Female same-sex sexual behaviors and practices are illegal in Tanzania. So, study participants provided oral consent. Researchers anticipated chances of encountering cases of traumatized (potential) WSW, their relatives or fellow WSW. Researchers, therefore, arranged with the WSW activist organizations and healthcare providers to provide appropriate assistance. Researchers compensated study participants with TShs, 10,000 [Appr. \$4] for transport fare (to and from interview places) and for time spent during the interviews.

## RESULTS

### *Study Participants' Characteristics*

A total of 39 individuals participated in this study: 24 in FGDs; 8 WSW in IDI, 3 community leaders in IDIs, 1 community member in IDI and 3 in IDIs with WSW's organizations. The participants' age ranged between 26 and 60 years. The WSW was currently single with majority never married and a few were divorcees. Their education levels ranged from Primary Education complete to First University Degree. Of the 36 WSW interviewed, only one reported to never have sex with a man.

During the FGDs and IDIs we asked our study participants to discuss on reasons why women and girls in Tanzania engage in female same-sex behaviors and practices. The WSW and community members presented varied reasons as presented below:

- a) ***In-Born Male Traits:*** A participant aged 26, never married, a university graduate, and identifies a transman reported,

*"The main reason why some of us engage in female same sex relationships is that we were born biologically female sex oriented but we have male attributes ... We tend to present and behave as males ... Some of us experienced this situation at early ages of 9 years ... Others at puberty ... I am one of those ... I am not sexually attracted to men .... I am only attracted to women ... Believe it or not, that is how we are ... It is our nature"* (IDI\_F, 26 years, 2021).

- Another participant aged 30, O-level education graduate, a diploma in information technology (IT) holder, never married, a transgender man and runs a non-governmental organization (NGO) that supports WSW, presented,

*"I recognized I am a male since I was 10 years old ... I had a problem with my parents because I forced dressing and behaving like a boy ... I refused putting on feminine dresses my parents bought for me ... I associated, and still associate mainly with males ... I started having sex with females when I was in Form I in the all-girls boarding school [name] ... I first had sex with a Form III student ... That has been my life ... I am currently running an organization that works with and for women ... Mainly women who have sex with women ... We get support from our friends in South Africa, Kenya and the U.S. [United States of America] (IDI\_C, 30 years, 2021).*

- b) ***Not Enjoying Heterosexual Sex and Seeking Sexual Gratification:*** A participant aged 46, has primary education, never married, a mother of two children, a tomboy and started engaging in female same-sex relationships at the age of 15 in 1990, reported,

*"I remember falling in love with two men [names] ... The fathers of my children [names] ... I had sex with them but not enjoying it ... I felt pain during sex [penis-vagina penetration] ... Frankly speaking, I only did it [have sex] to satisfy them because I needed their financial support ... My friend [a female] introduced me to same-sex sex practices that I found gratifying ... I reach climax of sexual excitement [orgasm] several times whenever I was with her in bed ... During that time, I realized what I was missing [in heterosexual sex] ... Since then, I don't desire having sex with men ... I am now a transgender man caring for my babies [female partners]"* (IDI\_G, 46 years, 2021).

Another participant aged 28, never married, with O-level education, a bottom, was oriented to female same-sex sex at the age of 23 by a female friend and had had sex with men only for survival (financial support), stated that,

*"You should know that there is a big difference between heterosexual sex and sex among women ... I can say that men are only after sex, they do not care what happens to their partners ... Business ends after they ejaculate ... They would come to you once a month or two, just to quench their [sexual] thirst ... Some men are bad-mannered and oppressive all the time ... I had sex with men because I wanted their money; not enjoying sex at all .... (IDI\_E, 28 years, 2021).*

c) **Males'/Partners' Abandonment/Desertion:** A participant aged 26, never married, a mother of one child, started engaging in same-sex sex practices in 2012 in an all-girls boarding A-level school and engages in sex work remarked,

*"I swear, I get no sexual satisfaction when having sex with any man .... My child's father ran away from me when he realized I was pregnant ... I hate that man ... That is how all men are ... I really hate them [men] ... They enjoy having sex with you but do not want to take responsibility for the outcome [pregnancy] ... I know I can't become pregnant from having sex with other women, but that is fine with me because I am currently engaging in same-sex sex, a practice which is quite gratifying to me" (IDI\_F, 32 years, 2021).*

A female Street Leader aged 60 and has lived in Dar-Es-Salaam her entire life, observed, *"Some women from well off families have uncontrollable sexual lust... They end up engaging in same-sex sex behaviors and practices ... some of them buy or sell sexual services to their fellow women" (IDI\_K, 60 years, 2021).*

d) **Women Care for their Fellow Women Compared to the Men:** Speaking in a tone as a leader of homosexual women, a participant aged 26, never married, a university graduate and a transman reported,

*"You know, women are good at caring for their partners [fellow women] than their counterparts ... So, once a woman recognizes this fact, she becomes more attracted and interested in engaging in sex with other women than in heterosexual sex ... For example, there are married women whom we occasionally have sex with, they would have heterosexual sex for the sake of satisfying their husbands and protecting their marriages ... So, they*

*keep coming back to us to have it all [sexual satisfaction]" (IDI\_F, 26 years, 2021).*

Another participant aged 28, never married, with O-level education, a bottom, was oriented to female same-sex sex at the age of 23 by a female friend and had had sex with men only for survival (financial support) compared male and female partners' manners narrating,

*"Actually, women are very caring, lovely and are available any time you need them and give support in every need ... A female partner can't scold or beat you in public ... If you do something wrong, she waits until you are in good mood and at home to discuss about that event for reconciliation... The opposite is true for men, and that is the reason I feel more comfortable having a female partner" (IDI\_E, 28 years, 2021).*

e) **Poverty:** A female Street Leader aged 60 and has lived in the city for her entire life, reported, *"Majority of these women [WSW] come from poor families or backgrounds ... Economically well-off women, therefore, take advantage of them ... They give them some money and use them [having sex] as they want [different styles and types of sex]" (IDI\_K, 60 years, 2021).* A participant aged 29, never married, self-identify a transman, has O-level education, started engaging in same sex practices in 2004, sells second-hand shoes for her living and exclusively having sex with women, presented that she comes from a poor family that forced her to have sexual relationships with a young man in her home village to feed the family. She reported,

*"You know, I come from a very poor family ... We lived from hand to mouth and often slept on empty stomachs ... One young man in our village was relatively well off and used to seduce me for sex ... He knew we were poor ... He used to give me Tshs. 5000 [appr. \$2] every other day ... In the long run, something bad happened to me [raped by this young man] .... Since then, I developed hatred towards men ... I identify transman ... I have sex exclusively with women (IDI\_D, 29 years, 2021)*

f) **Rape Victims/Experience:** A participant aged 29, never married, self-identify a transman, has O-level education, started engaging in same sex practices in 2004, sells second-hand shoes for her living and exclusively having sex with women, referred to earlier, presented that her experience with rape at the age of 20 triggered her hatred towards men. She reported,

*"One day, he locked me in the room at a bar and guest and refused to let me out ... He forced me to have sex with him ... I felt bitter pain as his penis penetrated my vagina ... He broke my virginity ... From that day, I hated*

*having sex with men ... When I came to Dar-es-Salaam my host introduced me to this business [same-sex sex] that I practice to date (IDI\_D, 29 years, 2021).*

**g) Globalization:** A community member aged 32 and a businessman, associated female same-sex sexual practices with globalization, saying, *“The women and girls in this country imitate what they see on the social media ... They imitate everything including same-sex sexual behaviors and practices ... Others learn them [same sex behaviors and practices] from their peers or join this group due to peer pressure” (IDI\_L, 32 years, 2021).*

**h) Peer Pressure:** A businessman community member aged 32 interviewed commented, *“Many of women and girls in this city [Dar-Es-Salaam] engage in female same-sex behaviors and practices due to peer pressure ... They are influenced by stories they hear from their female friends practicing female same-sex sex” (IDI\_L, 32 years, 2021).*

**i) Eroding African Social Norms and Values:** A male Religious Leader aged 43, married, a father of three children and holding a Diploma in Theology, interviewed observed,

*“I my view, same-sex sexual behaviors and practices develop from unlimited and uncontrolled friendships between two or more women, which is un-African and violating traditional African values ... similarly, young generation lacks proper guidance as they grow ... The education system in place remains silent on changes the adolescents experience ... They practice whatever they see or hear, including same-sex sex practices ... Without strict guidance, they are affected psychologically, thus accepting female same-sex sex behaviors and practices as a normal way of life” (IDI\_I, 43 years, 2021).*

**j) Paid Sex Among Women:** Most of the participants affirmed paid sex is a common practice among WSW. A participant in the FGD, a tomboy, for example, reported,

*Sincerely, there are so many women who sell and buy sex ... We use them [we hire them] ... Others use us [they hire us] ... The sex workers accept any client [males or females] as long as one is likely to pay ... Sometime, tomboys in need of sex approach the sex workers for [sexual] services and pay them ... Amount paid is a secret between the two ... Yes, we have sex buyers and sex sellers among WSW in this country” (FGD\_1, 2021).*

Another participant aged 26, never married, a transman, and a university graduate had this to report,

*Yes, there are women who sell and buy sex among WSW ... I am one of them ... I have a Kenyan partner who saw my photograph on her friend's status ... She was attracted to me ... She began seducing me to be her partner ... She started sending me pocket money for food, rent and other needs I have ... After a while, she sent me a bus fare to Nairobi to [sexually] satisfy her ... Nowadays, she pays for my travel to Nairobi at least twice a month ... She pays for my shopping in Nairobi including protective devices I use ... We are in the third year of our relationship ... (IDI\_F, 26 years, 2021).*

A participant aged 35, divorced, a FSW, and switches roles in female same-sex sex [bottom or top], reported,

*Yes, there are so many women [WSW] who sell or buy sex ... You know, some of the women need to be enticed by giving or promising them some cash before or after sex ... Almost 99% of the women I have had sex with pay me or I pay them for services rendered ... As the men pay for sexual services we give them, the tomboys too, pay the women in cash or in kind ... (IDI\_B, 35 years, 2021).*

## DISCUSSION

Our study findings demonstrate homosexuality or same-sex sexual relationships are illegal in Tanzania [18, 19] and that women and girls became physically and sexually attracted to women for varied angles and forces that are somehow fluid and intertwined. Reasons reported include: biologically oriented, poverty, peer pressure, eroding African social norms and values, globalization and sex trade or paid sex among women. Some of the WSW presented had never been attracted to men and have sex exclusively with women; others reported were previously married to men; but due to sexual dissatisfaction, partner violence or abuse they experienced, they switched to exclusive female same-sex sex. Yet, other WSW reported having sex or selling sex to both men and women.

Similarly, WSW studied reported playing masculine or female roles during female same-sex sex depending on sexual services demanded. In addition, some WSW who reported having sex with or selling sex to women and men due to poverty, indicated could drop female same-sex sex behaviors and engaging in sex work if they had other legal income-generating alternatives to meet their basic needs.

Furthermore, WSW's narratives collected demonstrate that WSW sexual orientation and identity are not fixed. Instead, change with context, time and from varied reasons. That is, sexual orientation is fluid, and the relocation on the sexuality spectrum greatly depends on experiences and on personal relationships [20]. This fact, therefore, challenges the traditional

understanding that assumes one's sex orientation was, and still is, determined by his or her ascribes sex at birth [21]. In this context, members of the society who are attracted and had sex with people of the opposite sex were, and still are, regarded "heterosexual" or "straight". Individuals who deviated this norm, being attracted and having sex with people of the same sex were, and still are, labelled 'homosexuals', the 'gays' and 'lesbians' [22].

The discussion of current 'sex orientation' [9, 23] definitions is beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices presenting that embracing 'sexual fluidity theory' and conceptualizing sexual orientation as fixed or fluid may be a useful alternative approach to the conceptualization of sexual orientation as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual in Tanzania. In our view, the understanding of how women and girls in this country become physically and sexually attracted to other women calls for paying greater attention to critical interdisciplinary engagement of the cultural, theological, political, moral, economic and scientific drives of same-sex sexual orientation.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Two points that call for further research in Tanzania are clear from our study. First, our study participants' narratives suggest that one's sexual preference and orientation are not static; they are 'fluid'. For known and unknown reasons, they could change over time. Women and girls who identify and behave as heterosexuals in their early lives, for example, may later be attracted to other women/girls and self-identify WSW or lesbian. Likewise, women and girls who self-identify homosexual in their early lives could change their same-sex sex behaviors and practices to completely heterosexuals. Second, our qualitative formative study findings are not exhaustive to allow us to conclusively explain motives behind women's and girls' engagement in same-sex sexual behaviors and practices in Tanzania.

To reach this goal, we recommend for larger new sexuality paradigm-informed ethnographic and multidisciplinary (longitudinal/cohort) studies, and nationally representative samples to assess the genetic, individual and socio-environment factors that influence the onset and evolution of female same-sex sexual behaviors and practices in Tanzania. The goal is to establish empirical database on factors that influence the onset and the evolution of female same-sex sexual behaviors and practices in the Tanzania context to inform public attitudes and perceptions of homosexuality; (public) health research and interventions, and facilitate developing key populations-friendly care and treatment guidelines aimed at improving their health and wellbeing.

## Limitation and Strengths of the Study

Researchers conducted this study in Dar-es-Salaam City with a limited number of WSW and could not yield concrete answers to all female same-sex sexual relationships-related public health concerns. However, as intended, it has opened areas for further research to inform (public) health interventions and policies aiming at improving WSW's health and wellbeing.

## Authors' Contributions

SRK and HPS conceptualized the study, supervised data collection process; analyzed data, and jointly drafted and finalized the manuscript. All the authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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