

Perceived Gender Inequality Among Female Emerging Adults In Kigamboni, Tanzania: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood poses significant challenges for Tanzanian females, who often confront gender discrimination despite ongoing efforts toward equality. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of gender inequality among female emerging adults in Vijibweni ward, Kigamboni Municipality, Tanzania. After obtaining ethical approvals and permission from local authorities, we recruited participants from the local community. Participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling. In-depth, semi-structured interviews on the lived experiences of gender inequality were conducted with ten participants. Findings revealed that irrespective of the fact that Tanzania has taken great steps to address gender inequality and the disadvantages that females encounter, female emerging adults still experience various forms of gender inequality at three levels, namely, through relationships with (i) parents, (ii) siblings and (iii) the Community. In-depth exploration of these levels illuminates daily challenges, including unequal distribution of household chores, constraints to academic opportunities, and limitations in household-based decision-making. However, these gender-influenced challenges are not generalized since some participants noted incidences of perceived equality, highlighting variability in experiences. These insights underscore the need for societal reform to address biases and enhance opportunities for Tanzanian female emerging adults. This study illuminates' challenges faced during their transition to adulthood, emphasizing potential for positive change through systemic improvements promoting gender equity, empowering young women in societal, economic, and educational spheres for Tanzania's development.

Keywords: Female emerging adults, qualitative research, gender inequality, Tanzania

Introduction

Feminist Lens in Exploring Lived Experience of Gender Inequality by Female Children.

This study explores experiences of gender inequality through a feminist lens, focusing on systemic power imbalances that disadvantage female children as they approach adulthood compared to males. It analyses patriarchal structures that privilege male children in various subtle and non-subtle ways such as through access to education and decision-making while in many cases relegating females to domestic roles. These entrenched patriarchal norms perpetuate gender inequalities [10, 13, 21, 22, 25].

This research is feminist in its challenge to patriarchal ideologies and amplification of marginalized voices. By centering the experiences of female children as valid knowledge, it aligns with feminist epistemologies deconstructing oppression. Its advocacy for transformative change, such as dismantling gendered structures and

promoting equal opportunities, reflects the feminist principle of praxis—integrating theory and action to advance gender justice [25, 26, 30].

Several studies have examined the experience of females in Tanzania [2, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 23].

The study acknowledges the significant progress by the Government of Tanzania, in addressing sex-based discrimination and promoting gender equity [28, 30]. Key achievements include strengthened education on sexual violence, gender desks in ministries, gender-sensitive legal reforms, and economic empowerment programs like the Women's Development Fund and Gender Responsive Budget. Improvements in reproductive health, women's leadership, and educational parity also reflect significant strides.

Tanzania has also introduced several initiatives to address gender inequality, including the 2000 Women and Gender Development

Policy, the Law of the Child Act (2009), promoting equality in education, inheritance, and expression. The constitution mandates gender equality, and Tanzania upholds international agreements like CEDAW (1979) and the EAC Treaty (1998), with gender desks in various ministries.

However, despite these advancements, patriarchal customs continue to challenge true gender equality, particularly among female emerging adults (FEA) [25]. These deeply entrenched cultural norms and systemic barriers remain significant obstacles to progress, with issues such as gender-based violence, under-representation of women in leadership, economic disparities, and restrictive social norms limiting women's access to resources [25]. Furthermore, challenges like child marriage, adolescent pregnancies, and early sexual initiation—17.4% of 3,725 girls engaging in sex before age 15 [7] are still prevalent. The lack of decision access to sexual and reproductive health education and services exacerbates these inequalities [23]. These disparities underscore the need for continued research on gendered challenges facing female adolescents. By adopting a feminist lens, this study critically examines these issues, advocates for systemic change, and promotes policies fostering gender equity. Gender inequality is a global issue, manifesting mostly as discrimination against female emerging adults (FEA) [13, 21, 28, 33]. It involves disparities and unequal treatment based on sex, restricting access to resources and opportunities. This imbalance occurs when one gender is favored or disadvantaged, leading to unequal outcomes shaped by differences in access, rights, and social positioning. This study focused on Female emerging adults to examine the experiences of gender inequality at the household level, its manifestation, and the factors leading to such situations. Emerging adulthood is described as the transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood. Age definitions differ globally based on the social, economic, cultural and geographical conditions; UNESCO (2021) defines youth as 15–24, [1] identifies 18–25, extendable to 29, and Tanzania defines it as 15–35. This study focused on ages 15–20.

Several studies have contended that Female Emerging Adults (FEA) face gender inequalities, especially in decision-making over their bodies and access to or control over resources. These disparities arise from biological, physical, psychological, or cultural norms [16, 23, 33]. In Tanzania, FEAs face greater limitations than males in engaging in social, economic, and political processes crucial for their well-being [28, 30].

Despite country-level and global efforts to address gender inequality, several countries still maintain certain aspects of gender inequality within families in the contemporary world, which sometimes manifests itself through a preference for investing in male children over female, fostering feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem among female children. In some places, female children are often denied property rights [15, 23] relegated to domestic chores, and excluded from decision-making, limiting their academic and personal

development opportunities [9]. Fathers can reinforce gender inequality by neglecting household chores, perpetuating traditional roles, and fostering negative attitudes about women and girls, increasing female children's risk of poverty and early or forced marriage [12]. Gender disparities also persist beyond the family in communities, limiting opportunities for females.

While there has been some progress on gender equality issues for FEA patriarchal oppression remains a significant challenge for many African women, including students, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa including Tanzania. Gender inequality in education, traditions, cultural norms, and power dynamics continues to limit girls' and women's participation in development activities, further exacerbating poverty [2, 8, 13].

Tesha et al. (2023) highlighted gender inequities in Tanzania, particularly in women's access to reproductive health services, due to a patriarchal system that marginalizes women. In such systems, gender roles are rigidly defined, often restricting women's, including FEA aged 15 to 35 years, access to education, economic activities, and autonomy in decision-making, including decisions about their health. These findings align with Gouws (2017), showing how social norms and traditional gender roles, such as household chores and caregiving, intersect with financial constraints to limit access to reproductive health services. [10] emphasize how gender norms in families perpetuate inequality by involving male children in decision-making on property ownership and many other aspects while excluding females and confining them to domestic roles, restricting their opportunities for education, personal growth, and economic participation.

In some communities, boys often enjoy more privileges such as better access to education and inheriting valuable assets compared to girls [8, 15, 23]. Girls face barriers to reproductive health services due to social norms, limited decision-making, and lack of resource control, worsened by financial constraints [23].

Feinstein (2010) identified cultural norms as a key factor in household gender inequality, supported by [2]. They highlighted a patriarchal system where men control wives, echoed by Tesha et al. (2023). Morley (2011) documented sexual harassment among female students and teachers in Tanzania and Ghana, impacting education, while Msofe (2016) observed that girls bear heavier household responsibilities, affecting academic engagement. Researchers have highlighted gender disparities in various areas, including education [8, 19, 23] employment [18, 33], land ownership [15, 23], and decision-making [13, 21, 23], stressing the urgent need to empower women and promote gender equity.

Gender discrimination persists in Tanzania, where FEA face disparities in rights and resources [2, 15, 17, 23, 28]. Despite constitutional equality guarantees and efforts by organizations like the Tanzania Network of Legal Aid Providers (TNLAP) to address issues like early marriage, challenges remain unresolved [18]. The Law of

Marriage Act of 1971 permits girls to marry at 15, while boys must be 18 [27]. Despite efforts by the Tanzania Network of Legal Aid Providers and the Tanzania Law Reform Commission to amend this law through national forums, no changes have been made [18].

The Tanzanian National Gender and Women Development Policy (2023) underscores the disparities faced by girls, limiting their potential and contribution to national progress. From birth, boys are valued more, perpetuating gender-based discrimination that affects education, work opportunities, and inheritance rights throughout their lives [28].

The Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups aim to dismantle traditional gender roles and ensure equal access to education and decision-making for women. The United Nations Development Programme-Tanzania (2022) emphasizes gender equality as crucial for structural transformation, inclusivity, and resilience in its 2022-2027 strategy. Despite progress, ongoing efforts are needed to address persistent gender imbalances. Employing the social-ecological model, rooted in [4] work, this study obtained a framework for exploring the interconnected factors contributing to gender inequality among FEA [4, 5]. At the individual level, the framework allows for the exploration of empowerment through knowledge and attitudes. The relationship level assesses peer and family support, while the community level examines schools' and workplaces' roles in fostering equality. At the societal level, it analyzes cultural norms, policies, and systemic barriers to gender equality. This approach highlights the dynamic interplay of influences shaping FEA's experiences of gender inequality [5].

Despite various initiatives, FEA in Tanzania still faces significant disparities in education, employment, and social participation, driven by cultural beliefs prioritizing male dominance, leading to marginalization and limited opportunities for young women [10, 15, 18, 19, 23, 25, 30]. A critical gap exists in understanding the full extent of gender inequality, particularly in regions like Kigamboni Municipality, due to limited research on FEAs experience.

Addressing gender inequality is crucial for fostering an inclusive society where all individuals have equal opportunities to succeed. For FEA, overcoming gender-based barriers is essential for their overall well-being, personal development, and ability to contribute to their communities. Understanding the lived experiences of FEA can inform policies and programs that support gender equality, enhance mental health, and promote social and economic participation [29, 32].

The primary focus of this manuscript was to explore the lived experience of gender inequality among FEA aged 15 to 20 years at Vijibweni ward in Kigamboni Municipality, Tanzania, using a feminist perspective. This research focuses on FEA, a critical yet under-explored group in the transition to adulthood. It addresses how societal and cultural norms shape their experiences, filling a gap in the literature and offering insights to advance gender equity for this demographic. This leads to the central question driving this research:

What is the lived experience of gender inequality among FEA at Vijibweni ward in Kigamboni Municipality, Tanzania, through a feminist lens?

Methods

This qualitative study employed an interpretive phenomenological method to explore perceived gender inequality among female emerging adults (FEA) aged 15–20 years. Hermeneutic phenomenology facilitated understanding of participants' cultural, social, and historical experiences and their interactions with the world [6, 14, 20]. Dialogue was central to the process, enabling the co-construction of meaning and the elicitation of personal narratives on topics such as household chore distribution and educational access. These narratives were analyzed iteratively using the hermeneutic circle to identify key themes and link individual experiences to broader societal patterns. Grounded in literature, the findings were contextualized within Tanzanian traditions and global perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of how participants navigated and interpreted gender inequality in their lives.

Participants were recruited from Kigamboni District in Dar es Salaam Region, selected for its historical significance and large native population totaling 317,902 (161,502 females and 156,400 males [24], including the Umwinyi kingship tradition. Vijibweni Ward, with the highest population among the nine wards in Kigamboni, was purposefully chosen to ensure an adequate sample. The study targeted FEA aged 15–20 years residing in Kigamboni Municipality. Inclusion criteria required participants to meet the age range, reside in Kigamboni Ward, and agree to participate; exclusion criteria ruled out individuals with hearing, speech, or mental disabilities to address under-representation in research. Using purposive and snowball sampling, participants were selected based on criteria and referrals. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, with emphasis placed on collecting rich, descriptive data over quantity.

Recruitment began after obtaining ethical approval and permissions. Methods included purposeful sampling via house-to-house visits and a snowball approach, where initial participants referred others. We also distributed flyers at bus stations and community gatherings, which provided study details. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board and the National Institute for Medical Research Tanzania. Permissions were secured from Kigamboni Municipality authorities, including the District Medical Officer and ward administrators. Participants received comprehensive information about their rights, study details, risks, benefits, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation. Consent procedures included verbal and written consent from participants aged 18 to 20; minors aged 15 to 17 required parental or guardian permission alongside their assent. Ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice guided all procedures to protect participant autonomy and rights. Socio-demographic data and

experiences of gender inequality were collected from ten participants through one-hour, semi-structured interviews conducted in Kiswahili. Six interviews occurred at Vijibweni Hospital, and four in community settings. Digital audio recorders were used with consent, and probing techniques ensured detailed responses. Participants were assigned unique numbers for confidentiality, and identifiers were securely stored. Each participant received a nominal incentive (~\$5 US) for their participation. Daily evaluations enhanced interview quality, with non-verbal cues and contextual observations documented in field notes after each session.

Participant information was safeguarded using unique numbers instead of real names in all documentation. Consent forms, recordings, and papers were securely stored in a locked cabinet and later scanned into electronic files. Physical documents were shredded, and interview audio files were permanently deleted after the interview transcript was generated and its accuracy verified. Electronic files, including identified transcripts and consent forms, were stored on a password-protected, cloud-based server accessible only to researchers.

Data analysis began after the first interview and continued concurrently with subsequent interviews. Recordings were transcribed and translated into English, and verification was done. The analysis was organized using Microsoft Excel. Daily analyses guided by research questions ensured saturation by the tenth

interview. This qualitative study combined Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and [3] six-step thematic analysis. IPA provided a deep understanding of participants' personal meaning-making, while [3] method identified and organized key themes across the dataset, ensuring thematic coherence and depth.

Results

As illustrated above, the study involved Female Emerging Adults (FEA) aged 15 to 20 years, with varying education levels and income sources. Six were still attending school, while the rest had completed their education, with one participant having dropped out in grade 4. Most relied on parental support, while two (Participants No. 8 and 10) earned from small businesses, with a range of TSH 40,800(USD 16) to TSH 298,350 (USD117) monthly income. All were unmarried, and religious affiliation was evenly split between Muslim and Christian. Income differences play a significant role in shaping gender inequality, as limited earnings can restrict young women's access to education, independence, and opportunities for empowerment. Findings suggest that both faiths contribute meaningfully to how gender inequality is experienced. Each religious group brought unique cultural expectations and beliefs, influencing the participants lived experiences of being a young female in distinct ways. A summary of key characteristics is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n=10)

Participant Number	Age in Years	Religion	Education Level	Monthly Income in USD ^{a, b}	Marital Status
1	19	Muslim	Completed form four	\$40	Not Married
2	16	Christian	Studying form two	\$16	Not Married
3	16	Muslim	Studying form three	\$35	Not Married
4	15	Christian	Studying form two	\$18	Not Married
5	15	Christian	Studying form two	\$16	Not Married
6	16	Christian	Studying form two	\$20	Not Married
7	18	Muslim	Studying college	\$35	Not Married
8	17	Muslim	Completed form four	\$117 ^c	Not Married
9	18	Muslim	Completed form four	\$8	Not Married
10	20	Christian	Ended grade 4	\$35	Not Married

Notes: a = USD stands for United States Dollars; b = One USD is equivalent to 2550 Tanzanian Shillings; c = Stands for a participant with the highest income, running a small business, while the majority relied on their parents.

The study identified three key themes: "Experiencing Gender Inequality from Parents," "Experiencing Gender Inequality from Siblings," and "Experiencing Gender Inequality in the Community." These themes highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of gender inequality, reflecting its impact on both personal, family dynamics and broader social contexts.

Experiencing Gender Inequality from Parents

Some participants described experiencing unequal distribution of domestic tasks between them and male siblings and parental favoritism toward male children. This situation interfered with their personal development and limited opportunities for education and leisure. Some claimed to be burdened with extensive household chores, leaving little time for studying—unlike their male siblings

who had more freedom and opportunities. The imbalance also reinforced societal gender norms by positioning girls as primarily responsible for domestic work. However, two participants reported a different experience, indicating an equal distribution of household responsibilities between them and their male siblings, highlighting differences in family practices. For example, Participant #1 shared: I have become a person who lives taking care of the household, causing my academic performance to decline. Many responsibilities were left to me and the housemaid, and when the housemaid and my aunt left, I was the one left at home to do all the household chores and take care of my mother (Vijibweni, 22/12/2023).

Conversely, Participant #4 shared a contrasting experience, as she stated:

I have never experienced gender inequality in my family because we work together equally, and everything is distributed fairly. For instance, if I am tasked to wash the dishes, fetch water, or sweep inside; my brother is tasked to sweep the yard and water the vegetables. I have never been affected by anything (Vijibweni, 23/12/2023).

Furthermore, Participant #4 provided insights into specific chore dynamics, revealing traditional gender role assignment, saying: Mmhh, regarding sweeping the yard and watering the vegetables, that's a shared responsibility for all of us, both the girls and the boys. But honestly, my brother has never cooked or washed dishes. I usually cook with my sister; if I cook during the day, she cooks at night, or if I cook at night, she cooks during the day (Vijibweni, 23/12/2023).

This suggests that while some families are adopting more equitable household responsibilities, traditional gender role assignment continues to persist, shaping young women's experiences of gender inequality. Some participants also described how their parents prioritized gender preference in academic endeavors based on personal beliefs and societal norms. Two out of five participants noted being deprived of educational rights compared to their male siblings, while three affirmed receiving equitable opportunities regardless of gender. Participant #7 shared:

In the home environment, girls are often treated as if they are not equal to boys. For example, a girl can complete her education up to form four and achieve a division four grade, and her parents might not see the need to support her further, but for a boy, all effort will be taken. They may even belittle her, as for me I got division four; my father belittled me, saying, "You can't continue with your education; you better learn tailoring or just get married." Now, my mother intervened to ensure I could continue with my studies (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023).

Such a comment suggests that while some households are making progress, deeply ingrained cultural norms continue to shape the educational and personal futures of young women, highlighting persistent gender bias in educational opportunities. In contrast, participant #5 conveyed equal access to education for all family

members. She stated: "However, equal rights in education are ensured by my parents, by providing everyone with a good education." (Vijibweni, 23/12/2023).

The third experience discussed by participants revolves around the autonomy granted by parents to their children in making decisions for themselves and participating in family decision-making processes, with six sharing their insights. Three participants recalled parental empowerment in decision-making for personal and family matters. Conversely, three participants noted inequality, where they perceived that their voices were marginalized compared to their male counterparts. This was also not a general experience across the study participants. For example, participant #8 shared about her active involvement in decision-making processes within her family, highlighting her contribution and the respect her parents afford her opinions, narrating:

My parents give me a lot of freedom to make decisions. My parents want me to study like my male siblings and become a successful person. But I've decided to focus on my business endeavors. I have a strong interest in studying beauty-related subjects, and once I finish that, I'll move on to other things. When it comes to attending college, I see it as an ongoing journey that doesn't necessarily have to happen immediately. Even if I'm married with kids, I'll still go to college. So, it's essential to first secure financial stability (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023).

This demonstrates how some FEAS are navigating their paths with confidence, balancing education, business, and future aspirations, which may inspire a shift in how young women's roles are perceived in their families and communities. This situation however, contrasts with the experience recounted by Participant #10, who described a gender bias in decision-making at their home. She reported:

For instance, when my father wants to do something [such as sell a piece of land], he doesn't involve the daughters; he only includes his son. It could be because he thinks that if he involves us, we won't be of help, but most of the time, he involves his son. So, you'll hear things from my brother like, "Dad sold a piece of land," but us as girls we were often unaware of such major incidences. Therefore, daughters become less of a priority compared to sons (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023).

A final way that participants perceived experiencing gender discrimination from parents was through resource ownership. Participant #2 noted an egalitarian approach, where her father involved all children in family property ownership. In contrast, Participant #10 described traditional beliefs and practices leading to unequal resource distribution favoring male children.

Also, our father had earlier distributed property (goats) before to his male children, but he has not given anything to us females. We asked him about it, and he said he would give it to us, but until today, I have never heard him discuss. I have never heard him mention it (laughs). Also, our father often says, "You will get married, so these things concern the boys. When you get married, you'll find them in your husbands' homes." I would say he is copying his father because his

father did the same. His father has ten children: five daughters and five sons. So, his father also distributed cattle to all his sons, but he didn't give any to his daughters (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023).

Experiencing Gender Inequality From Male Siblings

This sub-theme explored the second aspect of gender inequality experienced by FEA. Two participants shared instances where male emergingsiblings perpetuated gender bias through bullying behaviors, significantly impacting their sisters' experiences. These behaviors reinforced power imbalances, with male siblings asserting dominance over their sisters within the family. This dynamic created a hostile environment that undermined the sisters' sense of self-worth and agency. Consequently, participants internalized beliefs of inferiority or limited capabilities compared to their male siblings, perpetuating gender bias within the family. Participant #7 expressed: For example, when they finish eating and you tell them to wash their dishes, they say, "I don't wash that dish; you do." They are confident in saying this because they know that even if you complain to the parents, nothing will be done to them. Their parents will not force them to do anything (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023).

On similar lines, Participant #10 described instances where her brothers would mock her when she disagreed with them, which affected her feelings. She reported:

My brothers can make me feel very bad. When you disagree with them, they mock you, saying things like, "Maybe that's why you haven't gone to school or something like that." In this case, it makes me feel extremely bad (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023)

Experiencing Gender Inequality In The Community

With regards to community experiences, some participants highlighted gender bias favoring boys in chores, education, jobs, decision-making, bullying, attitudes towards early marriage, power dynamics, and sexual harassment. While experiences varied, the study focused on four main issues identified within the community by FEA. This selective approach ensured clarity and depth in analyzing specific aspects of gender inequality, fostering a focused discussion of these key issues. By prioritizing these four elements, the presentation remained coherent and connected broader gender dynamics and societal norms, enhancing understanding without overwhelming the reader. The study aimed to shed light on how such biases shaped the experiences of FEA.

The primary aspect of gender-based experiences within the community involved job opportunities, where two participants shared instances of discrimination favoring boys over girls. Participant #10 reported: "Within the community, there are instances where a male child is chosen over a female in certain opportunities, people might say, this is a girl, leave her". (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023). This was echoed by participant #3, who highlighted the unequal treatment of job opportunities within society. She shared that:

Also, in society, when there are job opportunities such as political events, male children are given priority, and female children are left behind; in politics, for example, when the political party needs 20 or 30 young people to go to villages and talk about the current government, they will take only boys. That seems completely unfair to me because it appears to favor men over women; because during these political events, there is an allowance for participants (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023).

The second experience of gender bias in the community centered on property ownership, as reported by participant #6. She reported: Another experience I faced is regarding the ownership of property between boys and girls in some societies, especially in the rural community where I grew up, you find that women are told they are not entitled to inherit anything. They also experience situations where women are denied inheritance to landed property. All property belongs to men, and a woman is expected to get married and live with her husband. They keep on saying that a woman should stay at home and help with household chores while the boy attends school and studies. But the same boy who goes to school ends up smoking marijuana and getting involved in gangs, whereas the girl if given the chance to go to school, could excel and achieve more than the boy (Vijibweni, 23/12/2023)

This girl was reflecting on her experiences in her home community of Dodoma, where her father and a few male community members emphasized inheritance, favoring boys over girls. However, in the diverse community of Kigamboni, she has not encountered such narratives. The third instance of gender bias within the community revolved around attitudes towards early marriage and power dynamics within marital relationships. Five participants shared their insights on this issue, with none reporting personal instances of coercion and societal pressures leading to early marriages. While some parental influence exists, participants mainly cited community pressure and societal expectations as key drivers of early marriage, making it a broader community issue. However, two of the five highlighted instances where they witnessed peers being forced into marriage before the age of 18, while three shared that they had never witnessed such incidents. Participant #6 underscored financial pressures driving families to marry off underage girls for economic gain, often against their educational aspirations due to parental coercion. She shared that:

I have not experienced this personally, though some families marry off their children under the age of 18 due to financial reasons. You find that parents are poor, so to acquire wealth they marry off a girl under the age of 18. Some girls may not want to get married because they want to continue with their education, but their parents force them into marriage to gain money, and wealth, and continue with their lives (Vijibweni, 23/12/2023).

Similarly, participant #8 reported:

Speaking about community, I am addressing a concern that resonates

with many girls in our community. While I have the autonomy to make personal decisions in my family, not everyone enjoys the same privilege. Take the example of marriage, where a girl might wish to delay it due to her belief that it's not the right time, but societal pressures, often supported by her parents, might compel her to marry against her wishes, which is a prevalent issue in our society. Additionally, you may observe instances where a girl assesses her life and living conditions within her community, concluding that marriage appears to be a more viable option given the challenging environment she finds herself in. On my part, my parents have not forced me into marriage (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023).

In contrast, Participant #4 reported not witnessing any instances of girls being forced into marriage within her community, indicating a diverse range of experiences regarding early marriage perceptions and practices. She reported: "In my community, I have never seen a girl married before the age of 18 (Vijibweni, 22/12/2023)."

The last aspect of gender imbalance in the community was psychological sexual harassment. Among the six participants who shared insights, three reported experiencing sexual harassment, while the other three had not encountered such incidents. Participant #3 reported: "I was approached by men and declined, but afterward, they spread negative rumors about me, saying I had a romantic relationship with them (Vijibweni, 22/12/2023)." This mirrored participant #7's, experience, stating:

Some males have a complex and perceive that if they desire a girl, she should automatically consent to their advances. For instance, there are times when I walk along the street on my way to the bus stop, I would encounter some men or boys who try to court me or call out to me. When I decline, they mock me by saying, 'So you think you're very pretty,' implying that I'm too proud of myself for rejecting them (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023)

In contrast, Participant #10 stated she had not experienced sexual harassment in her community. She expressed: "Honestly, I haven't encountered any sexual harassment challenges within my community (Vijibweni, 24/12/2023)."

Discussion

The experiences illustrated above express the perceived gender inequality experiences of female emerging adults in Vijibweni ward, Kigamboni Municipality, Tanzania. Participants reported daily encounters with discrimination and varying perceptions of equality shaped by cultural norms and societal factors. Findings highlighted lived experiences of gender inequality through interactions with parents, siblings, and the broader community. Participants recalled systemic barriers and discriminatory practices that limited their opportunities for education and participation in family decision-making, all while they undertook household responsibilities.

Gender Inequality Experienced By FEA From Parents, Siblings, At School, In The Community, And Within Tanzanian Society.

The views of FEA reflected experiences of discrimination to perceptions of fairness at the family level, shaped by cultural norms and societal factors. This discussion uses feminist theory to examine systemic power imbalances disadvantaging women and girls, analyzing FEA's lived experiences with parents, siblings, and the community to understand how patriarchal structures influence perceptions of gender inequality.

These encounters illustrate how cultural expectations and social dynamics reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting female autonomy and opportunities. Feminist perspectives emphasize recognizing these experiences to challenge societal norms that perpetuate inequality. Amplifying FEA voices can promote a more equitable understanding of gender relations and empower young women in their communities.

Our first discussion focused on participants' descriptions of gender interactions within families, emphasizing parental influence on allocation of domestic tasks, decision-making, and educational support. Many reported gender inequalities, with females shouldering more household chores, impeding their education and personal growth. However, some families showed more equitable interactions, highlighting the complexity of gender dynamics and the need to challenge stereotypes and foster inclusive family environments.

Most participants observed that cultural norms entrench gender imbalances, such as exempting boys from doing household chores or girls not being regarded favorably in decision-making over family property. Parental influence reinforced these disparities, fostering a culture of inequality. Surprisingly, some females internalized these roles, accepting chores as their obligation. Addressing such ingrained beliefs requires nuanced approaches to challenge and rectify household inequality.

While only one study explicitly addresses gender inequality perpetuated by parents through assigning domestic chores to female children based on cultural norms [12], our findings resonate with studies examining community-level experiences. Prior studies have highlighted similar disparities in household labor among FEA [2, 14, 23]. These insights emphasize the need for interventions to challenge traditional gender roles and promote equitable sharing of domestic duties, empowering all individuals to reach their full potential.

Participants also shared experiences regarding parental autonomy in decision-making. Half of the participants were allowed to make decisions for themselves and their families, while the other half faced parental bias and exclusion. Some families empowered female children, valuing their opinions and fostering confidence in them. Conversely, others reinforced gender stereotypes, with fathers more often than mothers deeming female children incapable of sound decisions, leading to feelings of inferiority.

Our findings underscore the need to address biases that perpetuate inequality within families. While no study specifically addresses parental denial of decision-making power to female children, broader research indicates global disparities among FEA. For instance, in Tanzania, FEA lacks decision-making rights in reproductive services, leading to teen pregnancies and early marriages [19, 23]. Similarly, women in India and South Africa face exclusion from decision-making and patriarchal control [13, 21]. Half of our participants reported autonomy in decision-making, aligning with the Tanzanian Law of the Child Act of 2019, which promotes children's rights to express opinions [22]. This indicates that while some parents promote gender equality, others maintain traditional roles due to deep-rooted cultural norms, limited gender rights awareness, and inherited patriarchal beliefs—highlighting the need for continued efforts to challenge these biases. Lastly, participants shared their experiences with parental attitudes towards education, revealing varied support and gender biases. While many parents supported their children's education equally, as outlined by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2021) and the Tanzanian Law of the Child Act [22], some favored sons over daughters in accessing or completing formal education.

For those deprived of educational opportunities, fathers often perpetuated inequality, believing daughters would marry and offer little return on educational investment. This left female participants feeling undervalued compared to their male siblings, seen as heirs. For instance, one participant's father halted her studies in grade four to care for her brothers still attending school after his separation from her mother, while another faced opposition until her mother intervened. These instances underscore mothers' crucial role in challenging educational biases.

Our findings echo those of [9] in Ghana, which highlights how some parents prioritize sons' education over daughters in families, driven by the belief that boys are more likely to secure employment in the future, thereby providing greater financial returns to the family, contributing to cycles of poverty and early marriages to these females. Similar patterns are noted globally [2, 19, 21, 23], underscoring the need to address family biases and ensure equal educational access regardless of gender.

On the other hand, some participants perceived being sidelined or discriminated against by their male siblings as stemming from the latter's arrogant or bullying behavior, rather than cultural determinants, however, this was silently sanctioned by parents.

Participants #7 and #10 shared their experiences, noting that such actions often went unchecked by parents, which created a hostile environment and fostered feelings of inferiority among FEA. These experiences reflect how gender disparities within families can be reinforced when male siblings adopt attitudes shaped by parental influence and societal norms.

Our study's identification of sibling-based gender disparities

highlights a previously unaddressed issue. It reveals how family dynamics impact the autonomy and self-worth of female siblings. Dominant behavior by male siblings may stem from entrenched gender dynamics, mirroring paternal attitudes that oppress women. This perpetuation of unequal power dynamics within families exacerbates challenges for FEA, affecting their independence and self-esteem.

Insights from [12] align with our findings, emphasizing how male children learn behaviors from fathers who perpetuate gender disparities. They suggest that fathers can play a pivotal role in fostering positive sibling relationships by modeling respectful behavior and equal participation in household duties. Such actions not only improve family dynamics but also enhance the self-esteem and well-being of daughters.

The last part of the discussion focused on how FEA encountered gender inequality in their communities, mirroring family disparities. Our discussions highlighted key areas of inequality, including property ownership, sexual harassment, early marriage, and access to community opportunities.

One participant highlighted biases favoring male heirs in property ownership, prevalent in both rural and urban settings, where women are denied inheritance rights based on gender. This girl recalled her father and some men in her rural area Dodoma, prioritizing boys in inheritance, but she hasn't observed this in Kigamboni's diverse community. This reflects patriarchal norms in Tanzania, restricting women's financial autonomy and emphasizing the need for equitable property rights. Similar challenges are reported in Tanzania [15, 23, 25] and India [21], highlighting male preference in accessing resources. Such disparities reinforce male control over assets across generations, limiting girls' rights and perpetuating inequality. Advocating for equitable policies and societal change is essential to empower all community members [29, 31, 32].

The second form of gender inequality experienced by FEA in the community centered on sexual harassment. Three out of six participants reported incidents, including rumors, false allegations, and non-consensual touching after rejecting advances. These experiences highlight the widespread nature of sexual harassment, which denies FEA control over their bodies and perpetuates gender-based oppression. Conversely, other participants did not encounter such experiences, revealing diverse community attitudes toward women's autonomy and bodily integrity. This disparity emphasizes the need for targeted efforts to prevent and address sexual harassment, ensuring environments where all women feel safe and respected.

Communities where FEA did not face harassment demonstrate a culture of respecting women's sexual autonomy, contributing to broader gender equality goals. However, these cases also highlight the ongoing issue of sexual harassment. Research findings align with Morley's (2011) study on 'sex-for-grade' exchanges in Tanzanian and Ghanaian schools and the Tanzanian National Gender and Women

Development Policy, which identifies girls and women as more vulnerable to mistreatment than boys and men [25]. Addressing these issues is vital for creating safer, more equitable spaces for all.

The third form of gender inequality noted by FEA in their community relates to early marriage attitudes. While some participants didn't experience coercion, many observed peers forced into marriage before 18, depriving them of autonomy and often ending education prematurely. Early marriage, often financially motivated through dowry exchange, perpetuates unequal power dynamics in marriages, further compounding gender inequality [19, 34].

Once married, husbands often control key decisions, restricting women's agency. Some parents knowingly exploit Tanzanian law allowing girls to marry at 15 with parental consent [19]. Urgent legal reforms are needed to safeguard FEA's rights and education [19, 27]. Addressing these norms and legal gaps can empower FEA to shape their futures equally.

Our final point in discussing gender inequality reported by participants concerns disparities in job opportunities for FEA. In contexts with scarce employment, participants noted gender biases favoring males, particularly in politics and employment. This aligns with global findings on gender-based discrimination limiting women's participation in societal and economic activities [29]. A mixed-method study in Arusha, Tanzania, found that daughters have fewer economic opportunities than male counterparts, affecting their financial security and well-being [19]. These disparities restrict FEA's financial independence and future aspirations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and systemic inequality. Addressing these gaps is crucial for empowering FEA economically and ensuring inclusive progress through equitable employment policies.

Conclusions

This study illustrated that gender bias within families and communities is experienced in subtle and overt ways, highlighting the impact of patriarchal structures on daily life. Viewed through a feminist lens, the findings stress the need for interventions to address systemic gender disparities and challenge traditional roles sustaining inequality. Feminist theory advocates for reducing these imbalances by promoting women's autonomy and opportunities. The study offers valuable insights for future research and targeted efforts to promote gender equity and empower FEA.

Recommendations

The findings from this study indicate a need for further research on gender-based inequalities and their impact on the life situations of FEA. Recommended areas for future study include how extra-household relations shape inter-household perceptions of gender. In parallel, advocacy should focus on policy reforms at local, national, and international levels—such as raising the legal marriage age for women to 18 and securing women's property rights. Policies must

also support programs that economically and socially empower FEA. Educational initiatives should equip FEA to challenge gender norms, assert their rights, and help create supportive environments within families and communities, with inclusive messages promoted through various platforms.

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Declaration Of Conflicting Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Ethical Approval And Informed Consent Statements

Ethical approval was received from the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board (UC IRB ID: 2023-0491) and the National Institute for Medical Research Tanzania (NIMR) ethical clearance board as the study was conducted in Tanzania. For the consent statement, participants were thoroughly informed about their rights and the details of the study. This included information on the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, benefits, expected duration, and the confidentiality of personal and demographic data. For participants aged 18 to 20, the consent process involved both verbal and written consent, along with consent for the recording of interviews. Minor participants, aged 15 to 17, were required to obtain verbal and written permission from their parents or guardians prior to data collection. These minors also provided verbal

assent and signed assent forms to indicate their willingness to participate.

All participants, including minors, and the parent or guardian of each minor participant were briefed on their right to participate and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions required by the Tanzania National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR). De-identified data may be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and are subject to NIMR approval. Researchers interested in accessing the data should contact.

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