Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences
ISSN: 2583-2034

GSAR PUBLISHERS
GLOBAL SCIENTIFIC AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH

OPEN ACCESS

Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences
ISSN: 2583-2034
Abbreviated key title: Glob.J.Arts.Humanit.Soc.Sci
Frequency: Monthly
Published By GSAR Publishers
Journal Homepage Link: https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjahss-home/

Volume - 6 | Issue - 11 | November 2026 | Total pages 1173-1182 | DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.24078467

The Influence of Cultural Beliefs on Help-Seeking Behavior among Female Civil Servants Experiencing Sexual Violence in Kibaha District Council, Coast Region, Tanzania

By

[1]Joyce Lukindo Stephen, [2]Johnson Nzau Mavole and [3]John Ewing Hughson

[1,2&3]St. Augustine University of Tanzania. Website

Article History
Received: 25- 10- 2026
Accepted: 05- 11- 2026
Published: 09- 11- 2026

Corresponding author
Joyce Lukindo Stephen

Abstract

This study examined the Cultural determinants of help-seeking behavior among female civil servants facing sexual violence in Kibaha District Council, Tanzania. Specifically, it examined the influence of cultural beliefs, social stigma and fear of social consequences, and workplace power relations on women's decisions to seek help. The study employed a mixed methods approach, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data to capture both general patterns and participants' experiences. Quantitative data were obtained from 80 female civil servants, while qualitative information was gathered through in-depth interviews and key informant interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that cultural factors influenced help-seeking behavior. Concerning cultural beliefs, 51.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that cultural beliefs discouraged reporting, 75.0% identified family honor as a barrier, and 58.8% acknowledged the influence of traditional gender expectations. However, 98.8% rejected the view that women should remain silent after experiencing sexual violence, suggesting changing attitudes towards disclosure. The qualitative findings reinforced these patterns by highlighting concerns about judgement, family reputation, retaliation, confidentiality and professional security. The study concludes that women's help-seeking decisions are shaped by cultural and workplace realities. It recommends strengthening confidential reporting mechanisms, protection against retaliation, survivor-centered support services, effective implementation of workplace policies, and continued efforts to challenge stigma and cultural attitudes that discourage disclosure.

Key words: Cultural Beliefs; Help-Seeking Behavior; Female Civil Servants; Sexual Violence

1.1 Background of the Study

Sexual violence against women is widely recognized as a major public health, human rights, and social justice concern. Historically, incidents of sexual violence were often treated as private matters confined to families, workplaces, or communities, with limited institutional attention or legal intervention. Over the past four decades, however, feminist scholarship, international human rights advocacy, and public health research have transformed this perspective by framing sexual violence as a manifestation of unequal gender relations and structural power imbalances rather than an individual or private issue (Heise, 1998; Jewkes et al., 2015). This shift has not only increased awareness of the prevalence of sexual violence but has also drawn attention to how survivors respond to their experiences, particularly their decisions to seek help.

Globally, studies consistently indicate that formal help-seeking among survivors of sexual violence remains low. Many women choose silence or rely on informal coping mechanisms, such as confiding in trusted family members, friends, or religious leaders, instead of engaging formal support systems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). These patterns are particularly evident in societies where cultural expectations surrounding female modesty, family honor, and obedience discourage public disclosure of sexual violence.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Within sub-Saharan Africa, help-seeking behavior is shaped by deeply rooted patriarchal structures, economic dependence, and gendered power relations. Cultural beliefs that normalize male authority, blame women for experiences of sexual violence, or priorities family reputation over individual wellbeing continue to discourage survivors from reporting abuse or seeking professional assistance (Muluneh et al., 2020; Ogbonnaya et al., 2021). In many communities, sexual violence is still regarded as a private matter to be resolved within families or through community elders rather than through formal justice or health systems.

Tanzania reflects many of these regional realities despite important progress in strengthening legal and policy responses to sexual and gender-based violence. The enactment of the Sexual Offences Special Provisions Act and subsequent national gender-based violence strategies demonstrate the Government's commitment to protecting survivors. Nevertheless, national evidence indicates that sexual violence remains substantially underreported, with many women citing fear of stigma, social judgement, retaliation, and limited confidence in institutional responses as reasons for not seeking formal assistance (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] & ICF, 2016).

Existing studies in Tanzania have generated important knowledge on the prevalence of sexual violence and barriers to help-seeking among women, particularly within households, intimate partner relationships, rural communities, and economically disadvantaged populations (NBS & ICF, 2016; WHO, 2021). However, relatively little attention has been given to women employed in the formal public sector, despite evidence suggesting that workplace environments present unique challenges that may influence both experiences of sexual violence and decisions to seek help (Fitzgerald and Cortina (2018). Female civil servants occupy a distinctive position because, although they may enjoy educational and economic empowerment, they also operate within hierarchical organisational structures where concerns about professional reputation, career progression, confidentiality, and institutional loyalty may discourage disclosure of sexual violence.

Kibaha District Council provides an appropriate setting for examining these dynamics because it represents a growing local government institution operating within a community where formal administrative systems coexist with deeply rooted socio-cultural traditions. The district was selected because it offers an opportunity to examine how workplace structures, institutional practices, and prevailing cultural norms jointly influence help-seeking behaviour among female civil servants. Despite the presence of health facilities, legal institutions, and social welfare services, there is limited empirical evidence on how female civil servants within the district respond to experiences of sexual violence or utilize available support mechanisms. This limited evidence represents an important knowledge gap. While previous studies have contributed significantly to understanding sexual violence in Tanzania, few have examined how cultural beliefs, social stigma, and workplace power relations intersect to influence help-seeking behavior among female civil servants within local government institutions. Without such context-specific evidence, workplace policies and survivor support mechanisms may fail to address the realities that shape women's decisions to seek or avoid help. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining the cultural determinants of help-seeking behavior among female civil servants facing sexual violence in Kibaha District Council.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Sexual violence against women remains a persistent social and public health challenge in Tanzania despite the existence of legal, institutional, and policy frameworks intended to prevent violence and protect survivors. A study carried out by Mavole and Mutisya (2026) in a book edited by Nyaga and Zangene demonstrate how displacement from rural areas to urban centers or informal settlements, coupled with overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure, creates conditions conducive to GBV, including intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and exploitation among women. National evidence indicates that approximately 40% of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence, while about 17% have experienced sexual violence during their lifetime (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] & ICF, 2016). Although these statistics demonstrate the magnitude of the problem, evidence consistently shows that a substantial proportion of survivors do not seek formal assistance from health facilities, the police, social welfare offices, or other support services (Aboagye et al., 2023; WHO, 2021). This disconnect between the occurrence of sexual violence and the utilization of available support services remains a major challenge to effective prevention, protection, and survivor recovery. Existing studies attribute low help-seeking behavior to a range of cultural factors, including fear of social stigma, victim-blaming, concerns about confidentiality, limited trust in institutional responses, and cultural norms that emphasize female respectability, family honor, and silence following experiences of sexual violence (Liang et al., 2005; Muluneh et al., 2020; Ogbonnaya et al., 2021). Consequently, many women continue to rely on informal coping strategies or remain silent even where formal support mechanisms are available. Comparatively little empirical attention has been directed towards women employed within formal public institutions, particularly female civil servants and how cultural factors influence their help-seeking behavior specifically in Kibaha district. It is against this background that this study was carried out.

1.3 Research Objective

To examine how prevailing cultural beliefs influence help-seeking behavior among female civil servants who experience sexual violence in Kibaha District Council, Tanzania.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

1.4 The Conceptual Framework

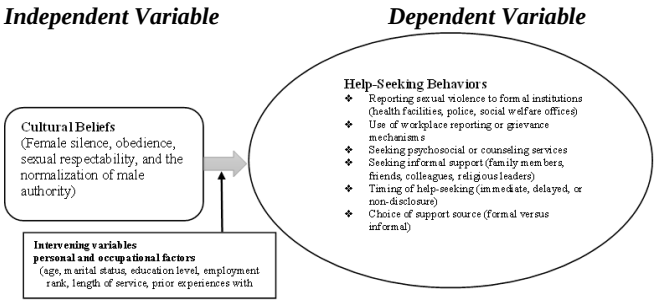

Figure 1: *The Conceptual Framework*
Source: *Own Conceptualization, 2025*

1.5 Literature Review

In this section, the theoretical framework guiding this study and empirical review literature supporting the research are presented.

1.5.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: The Ecological Model of Violence and the Help-Seeking Process Model. These theories are employed to explain sexual violence and help-seeking behavior as outcomes of interacting cultural, institutional, and individual factors. The Ecological Model provides a structural understanding of the environments in which sexual violence and silence occur, while the Help-Seeking Process Model explains how survivors navigate decisions about disclosure and support within those environments. Together, they provide a comprehensive analytical lens for examining the cultural determinants of help-seeking behavior among female civil servants in Kibaha District Council.

1.5.2 Empirical Literature Review

Sociocultural beliefs and Help-Seeking Behavior

Cultural beliefs provide an important lens for understanding why women who experience sexual violence do not always seek help, even where support services and formal reporting mechanisms are available. Across different societies, women's responses to sexual violence are influenced by beliefs about gender roles, family honour, marriage, sexuality, respectability and the expected behaviour of women. These beliefs become particularly important because disclosure is rarely viewed by survivors as an isolated personal decision. A woman may have to consider how her family will respond, whether she will be believed, how disclosure may affect her marriage or relationships, and whether she will be blamed for what happened. In this sense, cultural expectations may shape not only whether help is sought, but also when it is sought, from whom it is sought and whether formal or informal sources of support are preferred.

At the broader international level, Overstreet and Quinn (2013), in their study *The Intimate Partner Violence Stigmatization Model and Barriers to Help-Seeking*, examined how social meanings attached to violence can affect survivors' willingness to disclose their experiences and seek assistance. Drawing on existing empirical evidence, the authors developed a model showing that cultural stigma, anticipated stigma and internalized stigma can make disclosure socially costly for survivors. Their analysis demonstrated that women may avoid seeking help when they anticipate being blamed, judged or treated differently by people around them. The study is important because it shifts attention away from the assumption that women simply choose whether to seek help and instead shows how that decision is made within a social environment that can either encourage or discourage disclosure. However, its principal focus was intimate partner violence and it did not specifically examine female employees working within hierarchical public institutions. The present study extends this understanding by considering how culturally shaped expectations operate alongside the professional realities of female civil servants.

A broader picture of help-seeking among African women was provided by Aboagye et al. (2023) in their study on help-seeking behaviour among women exposed to intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa. Using Demographic and Health Survey data from 18 countries and applying multilevel statistical analysis, the researchers established that help-seeking remained relatively low among women who had experienced violence. Women's socio-demographic circumstances and empowerment were associated with their likelihood of seeking assistance. This finding is significant because empowerment does not operate outside culture. A woman's ability to make decisions, control resources and approach formal institutions is often shaped by the gender expectations prevailing within her family and community. Nevertheless, the use of secondary survey data limited the study's ability to explain how women personally negotiated cultural expectations when deciding whether to disclose violence. It also focused mainly on intimate partner violence rather than sexual violence experienced by women working in formal employment. The current study therefore brings the discussion into the public service environment, where women may be socially empowered through employment but still remain influenced by family and cultural expectations.

In Ghana, Apatinga, & Tenkorang, (2022)., through the study *Barriers to Help-Seeking for Sexual Violence Among Married or Cohabiting Women*, provided a closer qualitative understanding of this relationship. The study used in-depth interviews with 15 married or cohabiting women who had experienced sexual violence. The findings revealed that seeking help was influenced by socio-cultural expectations, shame and concerns about community judgement. Some women were reluctant to pursue formal assistance because disclosure could expose deeply private experiences to other people and potentially affect their social relationships. Others preferred informal ways of coping because these appeared less socially disruptive than formal reporting. These findings are relevant to the current study because they demonstrate how the anticipated consequences of disclosure can influence help-

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

seeking even when a survivor recognizes that violence has occurred. However, Apatinga's study centred on women within marital and cohabiting relationships. It did not address the situation of formally employed women whose decisions may also be affected by professional identity, workplace hierarchy and institutional reporting procedures.

Within East Africa, the World Bank (2020), in the *Kenya Gender-Based Violence Service Gap Analysis at the County Level*, examined gaps in the availability and accessibility of services for survivors of gender-based violence. The assessment drew on existing survey evidence together with county-level mapping of services and barriers affecting access. It established that socio-cultural beliefs and patterns of socialisation continued to shape women's responses to violence. Survivors frequently turned first to family members and other informal sources of assistance, while formal services were less frequently used. This pattern is important because it suggests that the presence of police, health facilities, legal services or workplace reporting mechanisms does not automatically translate into their use. Women may first consider whether seeking formal assistance is culturally acceptable and how those closest to them are likely to react. However, the World Bank assessment was conducted in Kenya and approached the issue mainly from a service delivery perspective. It did not examine the lived decision making of female civil servants within a single public institution, which is central to the present study.

Tanzanian studies provide even closer evidence of how deeply cultural understandings can influence responses to sexual violence. Abeid et al. (2015), in their research on community perceptions of rape and child sexual abuse in rural Tanzania, used a qualitative approach to understand how community members interpreted sexual violence and responses to survivors. The study revealed that perceptions of sexual violence were closely connected to prevailing gender norms and community attitudes. Some attitudes placed responsibility on survivors or normalized behaviours that made disclosure more difficult. The study is particularly useful because it shows that sexual violence is interpreted within an existing cultural environment rather than simply as an individual experience. In communities where survivors anticipate blame or where sexuality is treated as a highly private matter, disclosure can carry consequences beyond the violence itself. The limitation, however, is that the study was conducted within rural communities and was not concerned with adult female civil servants. The professional environment of women employed in public institutions may be different, although such women remain members of families and communities in which these cultural expectations operate.

Nyamhanga and Frumence (2014), in their study *Gender Context of Sexual Violence and HIV Sexual Risk Behaviors among Married Women in Iringa Region, Tanzania*, further demonstrated the importance of gendered cultural expectations. Using a qualitative case study approach and focus group discussions, the researchers examined the circumstances surrounding sexual violence among married women. Their findings indicated that unequal gender relations, women's economic dependence and socially rooted expectations surrounding sexual relations contributed to women's vulnerability. The study illustrates how expectations attached to marriage and womanhood may reduce women's ability to challenge sexual coercion or openly discuss experiences of violence. Its relevance to the current research lies in demonstrating that cultural expectations continue to influence women's responses within the Tanzanian setting. However, the study concentrated on married women, sexual relationships and HIV risk. It did not examine what happens when women who have greater economic independence through formal employment experience sexual violence and must decide whether to seek assistance.

The Tanzanian context is particularly interesting because formal employment and education may change women's attitudes without completely removing the influence of cultural expectations. A woman may be economically independent, professionally qualified and knowledgeable about her rights, yet still belong to a family and community where disclosure of sexual violence is considered embarrassing or potentially damaging to family relationships. This distinction is important for the current study. Employment should not automatically be interpreted as freedom from socio-cultural influence. Rather, professional women may have to negotiate between their knowledge of formal rights and the cultural expectations that continue to influence their relationships outside and within the workplace. This concern is consistent with the broader evidence showing that help-seeking is shaped by the social relationships surrounding survivors rather than by individual characteristics alone (Liang et al., 2005).

The literature therefore provides substantial evidence that cultural beliefs influence women's responses to sexual and gender-based violence. Across the studies reviewed, recurring concerns include gender expectations, shame, family and community reactions, and the social acceptability of disclosure. Nevertheless, an important gap remains. Much of the available African and Tanzanian literature has concentrated on intimate partner violence, married women, rural communities or general populations. Even the broader multi-country studies do not adequately reveal how women working in formal public institutions negotiate cultural expectations when deciding whether to seek help. There is particularly limited empirical evidence on how family honour, traditional gender expectations and culturally informed expectations of silence influence help-seeking among female civil servants facing sexual violence in Tanzania. The present study addressed this gap by examining these experiences among female civil servants in Kibaha District Council, where cultural expectations were considered alongside the realities of formal employment and access to institutional support.

1.6 Research Methodology

Research Approach: This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence to examine influence of cultural beliefs on help-seeking behavior

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

among female civil servants experiencing sexual violence in Kibaha District Council, Coast Region, Tanzania.

Research Design: The study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), this design involves collecting quantitative and qualitative data during a broadly similar period, analysing the two datasets separately and integrating their findings to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Study Area: The study was conducted in Kibaha District Council, located in Pwani Region, Tanzania. The Council is a local government authority responsible for delivering public services through various departments, including administration, education, health, finance, planning and community development. Geographically, Kibaha District Council is situated along Tanzania's eastern corridor, near Dar es Salaam. Its location provides connections to a major urban centre while maintaining its own administrative and socio-cultural environment. These characteristics made the Council a relevant setting for examining how social cultural factors and workplace relationships may affect women's willingness to disclose sexual violence and seek assistance.

Target Population: The target population comprised 350 female civil servants employed by Kibaha District Council, Tanzania, during the period of data collection. The study focused on this population because female civil servants operate within formal organisational structures where professional relationships, institutional procedures and differences in authority may shape their perceptions of sexual violence and decisions about seeking assistance. The female civil servants were drawn from different departments and employment cadres, including administration, finance, education, health, planning, community development and other technical and support units. Eligible participants were female civil servants with sufficient familiarity with the Council's working environment, organisational relationships and reporting procedures to provide informed responses concerning the research problem. Both permanent and contract employees were included, recognising that differences in employment status and perceived job security could shape women's willingness to disclose sensitive experiences or seek institutional assistance. In addition to female civil servants, the qualitative component included selected key informants with responsibilities or professional knowledge relating to employee welfare, workplace reporting procedures and support services. These included personnel associated with human resources, social welfare and gender-related services.

Sampling Techniques: The study employed probability and non-probability sampling techniques to select participants for the quantitative and qualitative components, respectively. For the quantitative component, stratified random sampling was employed to select female civil servants from the Council's departments and employment cadres. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to identify female civil servants who could provide detailed information concerning cultural expectations, social stigma, workplace relationships and help-seeking processes. Key informants were also selected purposively according to their professional responsibilities and knowledge of institutional procedures. These included relevant personnel from human resources, social welfare and gender-related services, as well as officers involved in employee welfare or workplace complaints. The original sampling strategy also provided for limited snowball sampling in the qualitative component.

Sample Size Determination: The sample size was determined according to the requirements of the convergent mixed-methods research design.

Quantitative Sample Size Determination: The target population for the quantitative component comprises 350 female civil servants employed by Kibaha District Council. From this population, the study selected a sample of 100 respondents. The sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) finite population formula, as shown below:

$n = (N \times Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)) \div [e^2 \times (N - 1) + Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)]$
Where: n = Required sample size; N = Population size (350); Z = Standard normal value corresponding to the 95% confidence level (1.96); p = Estimated population proportion (0.50)
$1 - p = 0.50$; e = Margin of error (0.083)
Substituting the values:
$n = [350 \times (1.96)^2 \times 0.50 \times 0.50] \div [(0.083)^2 \times (350 - 1) + (1.96)^2 \times 0.50 \times 0.50]$
$n = [350 \times 3.8416 \times 0.25] \div [(0.006889 \times 349) + 0.9604]$
$n = 336.14 \div (2.4043 + 0.9604)$
$n = 336.14 \div 3.3647$
$n = 99.90$
Therefore,
$n \approx 100$ respondents (female civil servants).
The sample was selected through stratified random sampling techniques to include respondents from different departments. Structured Questionnaires were used to collect data.

Qualitative Sample Size Determination: The qualitative sample size was determined by the need to obtain detailed and relevant information about barriers to help-seeking rather than by statistical calculation. The qualitative component involved two categories of participants. The first comprised female civil servants selected for in-depth interviews using interview guides to explore their experiences and perceptions of sexual violence and help-seeking. The second comprised key using key informant interview schedules selected because of their professional responsibilities and familiarity with workplace reporting procedures, employee welfare and support services. A total of eight participants were included in the qualitative component, comprising five female civil servants who participated in in-depth interviews and three institutional key informants.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

1.7 Research Findings and Discussion

Response Rate and Characteristics of Participants

The study targeted female civil servants working in Kibaha District Council and selected key informants with knowledge of workplace welfare, reporting procedures and support services related to sexual violence. The quantitative component had a planned sample of 100 female civil servants drawn from a target population of 350, while the qualitative component involved female civil servants selected for in-depth interviews and key informants drawn from relevant institutional positions. The completed research tools available for analysis show participation from female civil servants and institutional actors working in areas relevant to the study, including human resources, social welfare and gender-related services. This diversity was useful because participants brought different experiences and levels of familiarity with workplace structures and available support mechanisms. The demographic characteristics considered in the study included age, marital status, education level, employment position and length of service, factors which may shape women's experiences and decisions concerning help-seeking. The characteristics of participants are presented first to provide the context within which the subsequent findings on cultural beliefs, social stigma and workplace power relations are understood. The study targeted 100 female civil servants, of whom 80 completed and returned the questionnaires, giving a response rate of 80%.

Cultural Beliefs and Help-Seeking Behavior

The first objective of the study examined how prevailing cultural beliefs influenced help-seeking behavior among female civil servants facing sexual violence in Kibaha District Council. The questionnaire focused on cultural beliefs, expectations of silence, family honor and traditional gender expectations. The quantitative findings were considered alongside participants' accounts from the interviews to provide a clearer understanding of how these cultural factors shaped decisions to seek help.

Table 1: ***Cultural Beliefs and Help-Seeking Behavior (n = 80)***

Statement	SD f (%)	D f (%)	N f (%)	A f (%)	SA f (%)
Cultural beliefs discourage women from reporting sexual violence	13 (16.3)	16 (20.0)	10 (12.5)	25 (31.3)	16 (20.0)
Women are expected to remain silent after experiencing sexual violence	50 (62.5)	29 (36.3)	1 (1.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Family honour often discourages women from reporting sexual violence	10 (12.5)	5 (6.3)	5 (6.3)	25 (31.3)	35 (43.8)
Traditional gender expectations influence women's decisions to seek help	5 (6.3)	13 (16.3)	15 (18.8)	37 (46.3)	10 (12.5)

Source: Field Data (2026)

As shown in Table 1, 41 respondents (51.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that cultural beliefs discouraged women from reporting sexual violence, while 29 (36.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed and 10 (12.5%) were neutral. The findings suggest that cultural influence was recognized by a considerable proportion of respondents, although women's experiences of such influence were not uniform.

The qualitative responses helped to explain this pattern. Participants described fear of stigma, judgement and the reaction of people around them as issues that could make disclosure difficult. Some indicated that a woman might know that she needs assistance but still consider how speaking about the experience would affect her social relationships. One Female Civil Servant Interviewee expressed this experience as follows:

"Sometimes a woman fears reporting because she does not know how people will receive her story. She may think about what her family, colleagues and other people will say about her. Even when she knows that what happened was wrong, the fear of being judged can make her keep quiet." (FCSIDI 03, 2026).

An interesting pattern emerged concerning the expectation that women should remain silent. Almost all respondents rejected this view. Fifty respondents (62.5%) strongly disagreed and 29 (36.3%) disagreed, while only one (1.3%) was neutral. None agreed that women were expected to remain silent after experiencing sexual violence. This suggests a strong rejection of silence among the women themselves. However, the qualitative responses showed that rejecting silence as a belief did not necessarily mean that reporting was easy. Fear, stigma and possible consequences could still discourage some women from speaking openly.

Family honor emerged as a stronger cultural concern. Sixty respondents (75.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that family honor could discourage women from reporting sexual violence. Only 15 (18.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 5 (6.3%) were neutral. Participants' narratives similarly indicated that some women considered the effect that disclosure might have on their families and relationships before seeking assistance. As one participant explained:

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

"When something like this happens, a woman may think about more than herself. She may worry about her marriage, children and how the family will be viewed by other people. These concerns can make it difficult for her to decide whether to report or keep the matter within the family." (FCSIDI 01, 2026).

Traditional gender expectations were also evident. Forty-seven respondents (58.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that traditional gender expectations influenced women's decisions to seek help, compared with 18 (22.5%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed. Fifteen respondents (18.8%) remained neutral. The interview accounts suggested that expectations concerning women's behavior, respectability and relationships with men could make some women cautious about reporting their experiences. One participant noted:

"There are still expectations about how a woman should behave and how she should handle sensitive matters. Sometimes she is expected to protect relationships and avoid bringing private matters into the open. This can make her hesitate before going to the police, workplace authorities or other formal services." (FCSIDI 04, 2026).

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings reveal a distinction between women's stated attitudes towards disclosure and the social pressures that may affect their decisions to seek assistance. Although 98.8% of respondents rejected the expectation that women should remain silent following sexual violence, 75.0% identified concern for family honour as a possible barrier to reporting, while 58.8% recognised the influence of traditional gender expectations. The interview accounts provided further understanding of this contrast by showing how concerns about family relationships, reputation and the reactions of others could make disclosure difficult. These findings suggest that rejecting silence as a cultural expectation does not necessarily remove the social pressures surrounding help-seeking. The two forms of evidence therefore complement each other by distinguishing women's expressed attitudes from the consequences they anticipate when seeking assistance.

Discussion

The findings revealed a complex relationship between cultural beliefs and women's decisions to seek help. More than half of the respondents felt that cultural beliefs could discourage reporting, while family honor and traditional gender expectations emerged as particularly important concerns. At the same time, almost all respondents rejected the idea that women should remain silent after experiencing sexual violence. This suggests that women's attitudes towards disclosure may be changing, even though some of the social and cultural pressures surrounding sexual violence remain present. Family honor emerged as one of the strongest cultural influences. Three quarters of the respondents agreed that concern for family honor could discourage a woman from reporting sexual violence. The qualitative findings gave this result a more personal meaning. Participants explained that some women thought about their marriages, children, relatives and family reputation before deciding whether to disclose what had happened to them. In such circumstances, reporting was not viewed simply as an individual decision. A woman could recognize the need for assistance but still worry that disclosure might create conflict within her family or expose those close to her to shame or judgement. This finding reflects the wider understanding that help-seeking takes place within social relationships that can either support or constrain disclosure (Liang et al., 2005).

Similar findings have been reported elsewhere in Africa. Apatinga, & Tenkorang, (2022), in a qualitative study among married and cohabiting women in Ghana, found that shame, community judgement and other socio-cultural pressures contributed to women's reluctance to seek formal assistance after sexual violence. The similarity with the present findings is important. Although the women in the current study were formally employed civil servants, employment and education did not completely remove the influence of family and community expectations. This shows that women's professional position can coexist with cultural expectations that continue to shape how sensitive experiences are handled. Traditional gender expectations were also influential. More than half of the respondents indicated that such expectations affected women's decisions to seek help. Participants' accounts suggested that women could feel pressure to protect relationships, maintain respectability or deal with sensitive experiences privately. This is consistent with Connell and Pearse (2015), who explain gender norms as socially constructed expectations about behaviors and roles considered appropriate for women and men. In the context of this study, such expectations become important because they can shape how women interpret the possible consequences of disclosure and whether seeking formal assistance is considered socially acceptable.

One of the more revealing findings was the strong rejection of the expectation that women should remain silent. Almost all respondents disagreed with this statement. This finding may point to a gradual change in attitudes among female civil servants, where speaking about sexual violence is increasingly considered legitimate rather than something a woman should quietly endure. Nevertheless, the qualitative findings showed that believing women have a right to speak does not necessarily make disclosure easy. A woman may reject silence in principle but still hesitate when faced with possible embarrassment, family conflict or negative reactions from people around her. The difference between supporting disclosure and actually disclosing one's own experience is therefore important in understanding the findings. This interpretation is consistent with the Help-Seeking Process Model developed by Liang et al. (2005). The model views help-seeking as a process in which survivors first recognize an experience as abuse, decide whether they need assistance and then determine where to seek that assistance. These decisions are influenced by anticipated social reactions and by the perceived risks and benefits of disclosure. The experiences reported in Kibaha fit this explanation because women appeared to weigh their need for support against

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

concerns about family relationships, reputation and the response they expected from others.

The findings can also be understood through Heise's (1998) Ecological Model of Violence. The model recognizes that responses to violence are shaped by interacting influences at individual, relationship, community and societal levels. Cultural norms and gender inequalities operate at the broader societal level, while families, workplaces and social networks can either make disclosure easier or reinforce silence (Heise, 1998; Jewkes et al., 2015). This was evident in the present study because women's decisions were influenced not only by their personal views but also by expectations arising from family relationships and the wider social environment.

An important aspect of these findings is the apparent contrast between women's rejection of silence and their recognition of continuing cultural pressures. Although nearly all respondents disagreed that women were expected to remain silent following sexual violence, many still identified family honour and traditional gender expectations as possible barriers to reporting. These responses should not necessarily be interpreted as contradictory. Rather, they suggest that women may recognise disclosure as acceptable while remaining concerned about its consequences for family relationships and social standing. This distinction is consistent with Liang et al.'s (2005) understanding of help-seeking as a process in which individuals assess possible responses and consequences before seeking assistance. It also demonstrates the value of the mixed-methods approach: questionnaire responses revealed the contrasting attitudes, while interviews helped explain how cultural expectations could remain relevant even when silence was openly rejected. The findings therefore suggest that cultural influence among female civil servants in Kibaha should not be understood simply as a culture of silence. The picture is more nuanced. Women overwhelmingly rejected the idea that they should remain silent, yet family honor and traditional gender expectations continued to affect actual help-seeking decisions. This means that encouraging women to report sexual violence is important, but may not be sufficient on its own. Attention is also needed to the family and community expectations that make disclosure difficult even when women themselves believe that speaking out is the right thing to do.

1.8 Conclusion

Regarding cultural beliefs, the study concludes that concerns about family honour and traditional gender expectations remain relevant to women's perceptions of help-seeking. Although most respondents rejected the expectation that women should remain silent, the qualitative accounts showed that decisions about disclosure could still be accompanied by concerns about family relationships and reputation. This suggests that rejecting silence does not necessarily eliminate the social pressures associated with reporting.

1.9 Recommendations

Recommendations to Kibaha District Council. Kibaha District Council should establish a confidential and accessible reporting mechanism for employees experiencing sexual violence.

Recommendations to Gender Desk and Social Welfare Officers. Gender Desk and Social Welfare Officers should strengthen the provision of confidential, respectful and accessible support services for female civil servants seeking assistance following sexual violence.

Recommendations to Police and Other Justice Institutions: Police Gender and Children Desks and other relevant justice institutions should ensure that women reporting sexual violence receive confidential, respectful and timely assistance.

Recommendations to Community, Family and Religious Leaders: Community, family and religious leaders should promote attitudes that support women who disclose sexual violence rather than subjecting them to blame, shame or social rejection.

Recommendations to Female Civil Servants: Female civil servants should be provided with regular, accessible information about their rights, available reporting channels and the support services they may approach when experiencing or witnessing sexual violence.

References

1. Abeid, M., Muganyizi, P., Olsson, P., Darj, E., & Axemo, P. (2015). Community perceptions of rape and child sexual abuse: A qualitative study in rural Tanzania. BMC International Health and Human Rights, 15, Article 23. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-015-0065-4
2. Aboagye, R. G., Seidu, A. A., Cadri, A., Salihu, T., Arthur-Holmes, F., Sam, S. T., & Ahinkorah, B. O. (2023). Ending violence against women: Help-seeking behaviour of women exposed to intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa. PLOS ONE, 18(10), e0291913. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0291913
3. Apatinga, G. A., & Tenkorang, E. Y. (2022). Barriers to help-seeking for sexual violence among married or cohabiting women in Ghana. Violence Against Women, 28(15–16), 3844–3864. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012211060861
4. Bryman, A. (2016). Social research methods (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
5. Campbell, R. (2008). The psychological impact of rape victims' experiences with the legal, medical, and mental health systems. American Psychologist, 63(8), 702–717. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.8.702
6. Cochran, W. G. (1977). Sampling techniques (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
7. Connell, R., & Pearse, R. (2015). Gender: In world perspective (3rd ed.). Polity Press.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

8. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). Designing and conducting mixed methods research (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
9. Diez-Canseco, F., Toyama, M., Hidalgo-Padilla, L., & Bird, V. J. (2022). Systematic review of policies and interventions to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace in order to prevent depression. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19(20), 13278. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192013278
10. Fitzgerald, L. F., & Cortina, L. M. (2018). Sexual harassment in work organizations: A view from the 21st century. In C. B. Travis, J. W. White, A. Rutherford, W. S. Williams, S. L. Cook, & K. F. Wyche (Eds.), APA handbook of the psychology of women: Perspectives on women's private and public lives (Vol. 2, pp. 215–234). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000060-012
11. Fugate, M., Landis, L., Riordan, K., Naureckas, S., & Engel, B. (2005). Barriers to domestic violence help seeking: Implications for intervention. Violence Against Women, 11(3), 290–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801204271959
12. Heise, L. L. (1998). Violence against women: An integrated, ecological framework. Violence Against Women, 4(3), 262–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801298004003002
13. Jewkes, R. K., Levin, J. B., & Penn-Kekana, L. A. (2003). Gender inequalities, intimate partner violence and HIV preventive practices: Findings of a South African cross-sectional study. Social Science & Medicine, 56(1), 125–134. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(02)00012-6
14. Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes in social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: A conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. The Lancet, 385(9977), 1580–1589. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61683-4
15. Johnson Nzau Mavole & Mary Syokoli Mutisya (2026) Implications of Climate Change on Gender Roles: The Effects of Climate Change on the Socio-economic Development of Women, Children, and Young People in Magarini Sub-County, Kilifi County, Kenya. In D. Nyaga, M. Zangeneh (eds.), Critical Ethics on Mental Health and Madness, Advances in Mental Health and Addiction, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-10166-2_5
16. Liang, B., Goodman, L., Tummala-Narra, P., & Weintraub, S. (2005). A theoretical framework for understanding help-seeking processes among survivors of intimate partner violence. American Journal of Community Psychology, 36(1–2), 71–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-005-6233-6
17. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. SAGE Publications.
18. Muluneh, M. D., Stulz, V., Francis, L., & Agho, K. (2020). Gender based violence against women in sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic review and meta-analysis of cross-sectional studies. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17(3), 903. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17030903
19. National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) [Tanzania], & ICF. (2016). Tanzania demographic and health survey and malaria indicator survey 2015–16. NBS and ICF.
20. Nyamhanga, T. M., & Frumence, G. (2014). Gender context of sexual violence and HIV sexual risk behaviors among married women in Iringa Region, Tanzania. Global Health Action, 7(1), 25346. https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v7.25346
21. Odwe, G., Undie, C. C., & Obare, F. (2018). Attitudes towards help-seeking for sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian settings: The case of Rwamwanja refugee settlement scheme in Uganda. BMC International Health and Human Rights, 18, Article 15. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-018-0154-6
22. Ogbonnaya, I. N., Fawole, O. I., & Rizo, C. F. (2021). Domestic violence and sexual assault service providers' perspectives on Nigerian immigrants' domestic violence experiences. Violence Against Women, 27(12–13), 2255–2272. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220954269
23. Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
24. Smidt, A. M., Adams-Clark, A. A., & Freyd, J. J. (2023). Institutional courage buffers against institutional betrayal, protects employee health, and fosters organizational commitment following workplace sexual harassment. PLOS ONE, 18(1), e0278830. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0278830
25. South Africa, Department of Public Service and Administration. (2022). Annual report on compliance with public administration standards, 2020/2021. Department of Public Service and Administration.
26. Umubyeyi, A., Mogren, I., Ntaganira, J., & Krantz, G. (2016). Gender inequality prevents abused women from seeking professional help: A qualitative study in Rwanda. International Journal for Equity in Health, 15, Article 11.
27. Vuckovic, M., Altvater, A., Sekei, L. H., & Kloss, K. (2017). Sexual harassment and gender-based violence in Tanzania's public service: A study among employees in Mtwara Region and Dar es Salaam. International Journal of Workplace Health Management, 10(2), 116–133. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJWHM-02-2015-0011
28. World Bank. (2020). Kenya gender-based violence service gap analysis at the county level.
29. World Health Organization. (2013). Responding to intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women: WHO clinical and policy guidelines.
30. World Health Organization. (2021). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: Global, regional and

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).