

1 What do other men think? Understanding (mis)perceptions of  
2 peer gender role ideology among young Tanzanian men

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12  
13  
14 Abstract

15  
16 Peer influence in adolescence and early adulthood is critical to the formation of beliefs  
17 about appropriate behavior for each gender. Complicating matters, recent studies  
18 suggest that men overestimate peer support for inequitable gender norms. Combined  
19 with social conformity, this susceptibility to 'norm misperception' may represent a  
20 barrier to women's empowerment. However, why men misperceive peer beliefs  
21 remains unclear. Working in an urbanizing Tanzanian community where previous  
22 research has documented overestimation of peer support for inequitable gender  
23 norms, we used focus groups and participant observation to investigate how young  
24 men (age 18-30) forge perceptions about their peers. Men characterized their  
25 community as undergoing a transition to more equitable gender norms due to  
26 urbanization, globalization, and interactions with external agencies and different  
27 ethnicities. This change introduces novel diversity and reinforces uncertainty about  
28 prevailing beliefs. Confidence in the discernibility of peer beliefs hinged on whether  
29 associated behaviors were visible in the public domain or expressed within the private  
30 affairs of women and men. Furthermore, men acknowledged intentionally obscuring  
31 behavior deemed supportive of women to portray ideals of masculine strength. These

32 results suggest that misperception of peer gender role ideology is pronounced during  
33 periods of rapid cultural transition and illuminates the mechanisms at play.

34

35

## 36 1. INTRODUCTION

37 Beliefs regarding the appropriate roles, rights and responsibilities of women and men,  
38 which collectively constitute alternative 'gender role ideologies' (Krosta, 2007), range  
39 from relatively patriarchal (i.e. placing emphasis on male privilege and distinct gender  
40 roles) to relatively egalitarian (i.e. equal rights and nonprescriptive beliefs). Gender  
41 role ideology is largely understood to be a product of socialization, with communities  
42 converging on shared beliefs or 'gender norms' through a process of social learning  
43 and corresponding rewards and punishments for conformity and deviation  
44 respectively (Bicchieri, 2017; John et al., 2017; Morgan & Laland, 2012; Muthukrishna  
45 et al., 2016). Influence from peers may be especially important in this process,  
46 particularly across adolescence and early adulthood as young people spend more time  
47 with peers at school, at work and in their community, while also gaining their first  
48 experiences of navigating intimate relationships and adult responsibilities (Kågesten  
49 et al., 2016; Morgan et al., 2015). Understanding the formation and development of  
50 gender role ideology at this life stage presents an important opportunity to address  
51 harmful gender ideologies before they become ingrained in later adulthood and  
52 potentially transmitted to future generations (John et al., 2017). This is perhaps  
53 particularly true for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) which often contain a  
54 large proportion of younger relative to older people (George et al., 2021; Patton et al.,  
55 2016), and experience the greatest disparities in health, education and bargaining  
56 power between women and men (Jayachandran, 2015).

57

58 Recent research indicates that peer influence on individual gender role ideology is  
59 complicated by 'norm misperception', defined here as the tendency to inaccurately  
60 perceive the beliefs of one's peers. This work has largely focused on men, and  
61 consistently identified a tendency to overestimate peer support for inequitable or

62 'patriarchal' gender norms (Barnett, 2023; Berkowitz et al., 2022; Berry-Cabán et al.,  
63 2020; Bursztyn et al., 2020, 2023; Kilmartin et al., 2008; Lawson et al., 2024; Sobotka,  
64 2022). For example, Bursztyn et al. (2020) document that men in Saudi Arabia  
65 overestimate what proportion of their peers object to women's labour market  
66 participation; Berry-Cabán et al. (2020) report that American soldiers overestimate the  
67 prevalence of harmful beliefs associated with sexual aggression; and Barnett (2023)  
68 document a tendency for both genders, but especially men, to overestimate peer  
69 opposition to gender equality in Morocco. This phenomenon has also been recently  
70 documented in an urbanizing community in northern Tanzania. Using an attitudinal  
71 survey, encompassing multiple domains of gender role ideology, men tended to  
72 overestimate peer support for inequitable gender norms (e.g. as indicated by  
73 agreement with statements such as "*education is more important for boys than girls*" or  
74 "*only men should be able to own land*"). Evidence was also presented that this pattern  
75 is robust, albeit reduced in magnitude and scope, to using indirect wife-reported  
76 measurements of men's beliefs designed to address social desirability bias in self-  
77 report data (Lawson et al., 2024.; Lawson et al., 2021). Misperception of prevailing  
78 gender norms combined with the propensity for conformity (Cross et al., 2017; Morgan  
79 & Laland, 2012), may consequently stifle advances in women's empowerment.  
80 Supporting this interpretation, in Bursztyn et al.'s (2020) study of Saudi men,  
81 participants later informed that they had overestimated the extent to which their peers  
82 object to women's labor market participation were more likely, in contrast to a control  
83 group, to subsequently report their wife had applied for and interviewed for a job.

84

85 Why men misperceive prevailing gender norms remains unclear. Lawson et al. (2024)  
86 suggest three main explanations. First, in contexts of cultural change, assumptions  
87 about the beliefs of others may be uncertain and/or be based on outdated social

88 information. For example, if gender norms become more equitable with market  
89 integration or urbanization, relying on uncertain or lagged social information could  
90 explain why men overestimate peer support for inequitable norms. Logically, this  
91 mechanism is expected to be especially pronounced in communities undergoing rapid  
92 cultural change.

93

94 Second, individuals may incorrectly deduce private beliefs based on publicly observed  
95 behaviors. This could occur when individuals who deviate from perceived norms  
96 intentionally conceal their true beliefs. They might be motivated by a general desire to  
97 conform and avoid the costs associated with violating norms (Morgan & Laland, 2012),  
98 or more specifically, because expressing support for women's empowerment goes  
99 against traditional ideals of masculine strength. Supporting this notion, men who are  
100 perceived as relatively supportive of women's empowerment have been observed to  
101 face negative consequences, including social exclusion, across a range of cultural  
102 contexts (Heilman & Wallen, 2010; Kågesten et al., 2016).

103

104 Lastly, we can anticipate limitations in both exposure to, and ability to discern the  
105 credibility of, less reliable forms of social information. Rosling et al. (2018), for example,  
106 argue that media focus on negative events leads to an overestimation of global poverty  
107 prevalence. Similarly, external agencies addressing women empowerment may  
108 misrepresent or even exaggerate prevailing inequities in effort to attract donor and  
109 public attention, causing confusion about the true prevalence of harmful behaviors or  
110 beliefs (see also Schaffnit, Urassa, et al., 2021).

111

112 In this study, we turn to qualitative methods to address how young men perceive the  
113 beliefs of their peers, and what information they use to forge their perceptions. Data

114 comes from a single semi-urban community in Mwanza, northern Tanzania, where  
115 previous work has established, using quantitative attitudinal surveys, both variable  
116 beliefs about gender among adult men (20-45 years) (Lawson et al., 2021), and the  
117 aforementioned tendency to overestimate peer support for inequitable gender norms  
118 (Lawson et al., 2024). Although data collection was not simultaneous, situating the  
119 present study in this same context approximates a mixed methods research design  
120 (Creswell, 1999); providing the opportunity to triangulate alternative forms of data to  
121 gain a more holistic appreciation of how peer gender role ideology is perceived (see  
122 also Barnett, 2023) Moreover, our use of focus group discussions (FGDs) and  
123 participant observation fosters engagement with ethnographic context and the  
124 everyday experiences of our study participants. This is vital because gender relations  
125 and social organization are not static across time and space, but likely vary with cultural  
126 context.

127

128 We characterize our current study as addressing perceptions of peers at a time where  
129 young men are transitioning from late adolescence to adulthood; with all data  
130 collected from men aged between 18-30 years. While practically all cultures recognize  
131 a period following the end of childhood but preceding adult status (Schlegel & Barry,  
132 1991), definitions of the timing of adolescence are subjective and vary between and  
133 within disciplines (Crone & Dahl, 2014; Ngwenya et al., 2023; Sawyer et al., 2018). In  
134 this study population, average age at first marriage is in a man's mid 20s (Marston et  
135 al., 2009), corresponding with relative independence and community recognition as a  
136 responsible adult. Tendencies to conform are thought to be particularly strong early in  
137 adolescence, with individuals becoming more comfortable deviating from norms as  
138 they age (Morgan et al., 2015; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). More generally,  
139 adolescence and early adulthood are argued to be critical in identity formation i.e. the

140 process by which individuals develop a vision of their own identity and how it differs  
141 from others (Birhan, 2019; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Crocetti et al., 2008; Klimstra & van  
142 Doeselaar, 2017). With both conformity and deviation bringing potentially important  
143 social ramifications (Kågesten et al., 2016), we anticipate that the young men in our  
144 study will be actively engaged in deducing peer beliefs as part of their everyday lives.

145

146 Tanzania makes a fitting study context to explore the drivers of norm misperception. It  
147 has a large adolescent population and is experiencing rapid urbanization, which is in  
148 turn shifting traditional ways of life and mechanisms through which young men find  
149 their path to adulthood (Badstue et al., 2020; Palermo et al., 2020). The study  
150 community is no exception to these changes, with urbanization shifting women and  
151 men's anticipated roles at home and in the community (Kilgallen et al., 2021),  
152 increasing the potential for lagged social information to bias perception of others.  
153 Furthermore, gender norms remain relatively patriarchal, which may incentivize  
154 strategic concealment of emerging support for women's empowerment. Supporting  
155 this notion, Badstue et al. (2020) conclude, following discussions with multiple rural  
156 communities in Tanzania, that men feel pressure to uphold a 'gender norms façade'  
157 (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019), whereby men, regardless of individual beliefs, make  
158 concerted efforts to be seen as conforming to patriarchal norms in public. Young  
159 people are also increasingly subject to globalization and accompanying novel sources  
160 of social information, including via radio, television and social media, and externally  
161 driven initiatives addressing topics such as intimate partner violence (IPV) (e.g. Kapiga  
162 et al., 2019). These influences may act as both a source of change in gender norms and  
163 introduce new uncertainties in norm perception.

164

165

## 166 2. METHODS

### 167 2.1 *Study context*

168 All data come from a semi-urban town in the Mwanza region located within a Health  
169 and Demographic Surveillance Site (HDSS) which is managed by the National Institute  
170 of Medical Research (NIMR) (Kishamawe et al., 2015). Most of the residents belong to  
171 the Sukuma ethnic group (Wijsen & Tanner, 2002), although other ethnic groups have  
172 moved to the area due to the influence of urbanization and globalization. Traditionally,  
173 the Sukuma were agropastoralists, and the practice continues today, but men and  
174 women are increasingly working in different livelihood activities, working as skilled  
175 laborers, petty traders, or in small businesses (entrepreneurs) (Lawson et al., 2021).  
176 Unlike in the recent past when they were busy with farm and pastoral work, adolescents  
177 currently spend much of their time in schools, business, and labor work to earn money  
178 which has become an important means to survive (Hedges et al., 2018). Sukuma  
179 customs can be characterized as traditionally patriarchal (Wijsen & Tanner, 2002), with  
180 adolescent boys generally enjoying more support and favor than girls, and an  
181 expectation that adult men are the primary breadwinners; holding more power and  
182 decision-making authority than women. Boys are also expected to learn, hold, and  
183 preserve community traditions and norms. Women and adolescent girls are  
184 traditionally expected to be engaged in household work such as cooking, taking care  
185 of children, and other domestic chores. However, beliefs and behaviors regarding  
186 gender roles are changing, particularly in more urban areas, and are accompanied by  
187 a rise in both female education and labor market participation (Hedges et al., 2018;  
188 Kilgallen et al., 2021). Attitudinal surveys carried out with men in the study community  
189 in 2019 revealed a diversity of apparent beliefs regarding gender roles. In general,  
190 men largely reported support for male authority in decision-making, and often  
191 condoned the use of IPV to navigate spousal disputes (see also Kilgallen et al. 2021),



192 whilst also often declaring support for women's labor market participation,  
193 participation in community meetings, and girls' education (Lawson et al., 2021). For a  
194 broader discussion of changing gender norms in Tanzania see Bastue et al. (2021),  
195 while Wijisen and Tanner (2002) provide an account of how Sukuma identity formation  
196 has been influenced by globalization.

197

198 Data collection for this study took place from June to October 2023 using FGDs and  
199 participant observation. Institutional ethical approval was granted by the University of  
200 California, Santa Barbara's Office of Research (protocol number 7-23-0303), the  
201 Tanzanian National Health Ethics Review Committee (NIMR/HQ/R.8a/Vol.IX/4359).  
202 Approval to carry out the study was also obtained at the community level following a  
203 presentation of the study objectives, requirements and projected outputs to  
204 community leadership.

205

## 206 *2.2 Focus Group Discussions*

207 A purposive sampling strategy was used to select FGD participants, targeting young  
208 men between 18 and 30 years old and who had lived in the community for a period  
209 not less than three months preceding the study. Recruitment of the participants was  
210 done by the first author, assisted by a field manager who was an employee of NIMR  
211 and familiar with the community. Recruitment was opportunistic, with individuals  
212 approached following walks through the community to locate men going about their  
213 daily activities. To ensure we captured relevant diversity among men, we targeted  
214 those of different education level (previously shown to be associated with men's  
215 attitudes to women's empowerment (Lawson et al. 2021) and later religion (see below).  
216 To allow for effective participation, the number of participants in each focus group  
217 discussion ranged between six and ten. Following recruitment, participants were led

218 through a consent process culminating in collection of signed consent. Participants  
219 were also given a hard copy of a study information sheet and, if they agreed to take  
220 part, were reimbursed for their travel to the FGD and provided with refreshments  
221 during the discussion, typically lasting between 60-90 minutes. The first author  
222 conducted all FGDs in Swahili, assisted by the third author, which were audio-recorded  
223 and later transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis and publication.  
224 The translation of transcripts was done professionally by NIMR staff and later validated  
225 by the first author, who is fluent in Swahili and English, to avoid loss of realities as  
226 picked from study participants. After introducing the topic at hand (i.e. beliefs about  
227 women and men's roles at home and in the community), discussions were directed to  
228 reveal perceptions about peer gender role ideology, with follow-up questions asking  
229 participants to elaborate on how the beliefs of other men were visible or obscured in  
230 everyday interactions. Recruitment of study participants into FGDs continued until the  
231 first author felt saturation was reached. This led to a total of nine FGDs, and 72  
232 participants.

233

234 Table 1 shows participant characteristics. FGDs were stratified by education and later  
235 religion. This stratification was done to allow variation of perspectives, while also  
236 maintaining sufficient similarity in background within each group to foster effective  
237 discussion. The Tanzanian education system starts with primary education (7 years),  
238 then lower-level secondary (4 years), then high-level secondary (2 years), and  
239 thereafter an option to join a lower college for a certificate or diploma (2 years) or a  
240 university (with degrees taking between 3 and 5 years). In Table 1, "*low education*"  
241 refers to only receiving primary education or some secondary, but not completing  
242 lower secondary (form 4); "*form 4*" refers to completion of form 4 of secondary but not  
243 high-level secondary; "*middle education*" refers to completion of high-level secondary

244 or a lower college certificate or diploma; and finally, “higher education” refers to those  
 245 who had attended university. “Christian” and “Muslim” FGDs reflected purposive  
 246 sampling of youth entrusted with religious leadership roles in their churches/mosques,  
 247 such as religious youth leaders. Their education level varied from primary to college  
 248 level.  
 249

Table 1: Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Focus group	Number of Participants	Characteristics (all FGDs contained men aged 18-30, but were stratified by educational attainment or religion)
1	7	Mid-level
2	8	Lower
3	8	Form 4
4	8	College education
5	9	Lower
6	8	Form 4
7	8	College education
8	8	Christian
9	8	Muslim
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	

250

### 251 *2.3 Participant Observation*

252 Supporting data was gathered via participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002),  
 253 with the first author taking part in daily activities and events in the community. This was  
 254 done to complement information gained through the FGDs and gain greater  
 255 understanding of gender norms as lived, experienced, and interpreted by young men.  
 256 Participating in everyday activities and events further informed the first author about  
 257 what young men perceive and believe about gender roles, and how other’s beliefs are  
 258 made visible in their everyday lives. Young men were joined in religious worship  
 259 events, religious youth seminars, market gatherings, traditional “Bao” games, bride

260 price receiving events, and the 'amahane" (a Sukuma male youth initiation event).  
261 While participating in these activities, the first author engaged with men in discussions  
262 about topics related to gender roles and peer influence on gender ideology. At these  
263 activities he took brief notes which were later expanded into field notes.

264

## 265 *2.4 Analysis*

266 We took a directed content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to the analysis  
267 of FGD transcripts and participant observation field notes. This approach entails  
268 starting with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for the systematic  
269 coding of transcripts (Abdolghader et al., 2018). In our case our motivation is the  
270 mechanisms of norm (mis)perception. The first author applied open coding to identify  
271 themes using NVivo software, which we then later subsumed into broader thematic  
272 categories. For this paper, we draw on portions of the material that fell into categories  
273 we referred to as 'peer beliefs about gender roles', 'sources of knowledge on peer  
274 beliefs', and 'difficulty/ease in discerning peer beliefs'. While only the first author read  
275 all transcripts, co-authors who have previously investigated gender norms in the  
276 population discussed the coded material and took part in the selection of  
277 representative quotes. Participant observation data also ensured confidence in the  
278 characterization of young men's perspectives. In what follows, we summarize young  
279 men's perspectives on peer gender role ideology and the confidence they ascribe to  
280 their perceptions.

281

## 282 **3. RESULTS**

### 283 *3.1 Cultural change fosters diversity and uncertainty about peer beliefs*

284 *"Young men here are in two groups, those who support women and those who*  
285 *do not support women" P2, FGD6*

286 Young men recognized diversity in the gender role ideology of their peers; identifying  
287 other men in their community they regarded as relatively supportive or unsupportive  
288 of women's empowerment. Diversity in the beliefs of peers was attributed to broad  
289 cultural changes in the community, with discussions identifying four primary sources of  
290 cultural change. First, men noted changes brought about by urbanization that has  
291 ushered new challenges and demands as increasing costs of urban life necessitate  
292 both genders to work and earn an income to survive. In contrast, in previous years,  
293 when the community was more rural, men were characterized as the main providers  
294 for households, and their income depended primarily on cultivation, working on and  
295 ownership of land and livestock. Urbanization has forced spouses to work together to  
296 earn more to meet emerging life demands, ultimately fostering women's economic  
297 empowerment.

298 *"To be honest, the urban life has lots of challenges, and that forces every*  
299 *man to support women to earn an income. There are no uncles' or*  
300 *relatives' farms in the city, it is you with your wife and family. Men are*  
301 *increasingly forced to support women to gain income to adapt to urban*  
302 *challenges, because men can no longer stand alone as the only*  
303 *providers in the family" P6, FGD3.*

304 Participants pointed out that, unlike traditional life, which was predominantly  
305 patriarchal and favoring men over women, the ideas of empowering women have  
306 become part of urban life, as it would be hard for men to do without supporting and  
307 empowering women economically if they are to comfortably live in the rapidly  
308 urbanizing and modernizing society.

309 *"I am a Sukuma and was raised in the Sukuma traditions which never*  
310 *give chances, opportunities or support to women. To be precise,*

311 *Sukuma traditions and norms never give focus or priority to women. But*  
312 *I don't follow these Sukuma norms now because life has changed. It is*  
313 *not because I don't respect the norms or they are irrelevant, but urban*  
314 *life forces men and women to support each other" P4, FGD1*

315 Second, participants discussed changes spread by globalization. This could take the  
316 form of exposure to new ideas via formal education, which also brought boys and  
317 young men into contact with adolescent girls progressing well with their studies and  
318 so challenged conceptions of their ability. Moreover, participants pointed out that  
319 various sorts of media including radio, television, and social media (e.g. whatsapp,  
320 tiktok) have emerged as an important avenue through which young men (and women)  
321 are influenced. This influence included novel social information on the beliefs and  
322 actions of men outside of their community; including information about what women  
323 from different parts of the world have been doing, and how men in their communities  
324 support them. In discussions, participants also mentioned learning about women who  
325 were an inspiration in all aspects of life, even to men, and that there is a need to support  
326 and empower women like this.

327 *"The media has now emerged as very powerful way of getting*  
328 *information even more than in school, family or religion. That is why*  
329 *some people say now the world is the village. We hear topics and*  
330 *seminars about supporting women through radio and television. Every*  
331 *day, you see the president of Tanzania and some female ministers doing*  
332 *a lot of things that some men are not even able to do. In the media, I*  
333 *have even seen political campaigns in America, a man and woman*  
334 *wanting to be president of the country. All this information will change*

335 *men's thinking, because every man here has a radio, television or*  
336 *phone" P8, FGD4*

337

338 Third, and linked to the forces of urbanization and globalization, men noted influences  
339 from external agencies that had a direct or indirect link with the study community,  
340 including, non-governmental organizations, civil societies, and networks of activists.

341 *"You know our community is not treated in isolation with the external*  
342 *world. There are many organizations coming here from different parts*  
343 *of the world. They all change our thinking, and our culture. Some come*  
344 *from this country, or Africa and some come from different countries of*  
345 *the world. When allowing this linkage, men will not remain unchanged"*  
346 *P4, FGD6.*

347 Finally, the migration of new tribes and foreigners coming into the Sukuma community  
348 have also influenced how men think about and interact with women. This influx was  
349 seen as bringing new ways of thinking, attitudes and perceptions which not only  
350 change the composition of the community, but also the beliefs of indigenous men.

351 *"The contribution of non-Sukuma people who come in and live in the*  
352 *community cannot be underestimated in terms of changing men's*  
353 *attitudes towards women. These include businessmen, people*  
354 *employed in different sectors and cadres, trainers and researchers like*  
355 *you and others. They provide education on different topics, the changes*  
356 *cannot be seen on that day, but in a long term, men's way of thinking*  
357 *towards women are changing due to their impact" P3, FGD1*

358

359

360 *3.2 Peer beliefs are discerned from public behavior*

361 With recent cultural changes introducing novel diversity in men's gender role ideology,  
362 discerning the beliefs of others may not be straightforward. We directed discussions  
363 to ask how peer beliefs may be rendered visible in everyday interactions. Study  
364 participants pointed out that other men's perspectives on women's empowerment  
365 could be visible in different ways. One obvious indicator was men who supported their  
366 wives by allowing them to work outside the home to earn an income.

367 *[...] men's financial capability varies, not all men can start a business for*  
368 *their wives to earn income. But when you see a wife is working outside*  
369 *the home, you know she has a very supportive man. Those men who are*  
370 *not supportive will not allow their wife to work" P4, FGD9*

371 Second, study participants pointed out that some men would open a business for  
372 women to run and earn some income. They said that supportive men would not let  
373 their wives remain idle in the household ,but would help them run businesses even if  
374 they are small businesses that require small capital or only make a small return.

375 *"You know that these men are supportive by looking at what their wives*  
376 *are doing. Supportive men will start a small business for their wives to*  
377 *keep them busy even if the return is so small. Such men will never want*  
378 *their wives to remain idle at home, they will bring them out to be busy."*  
379 *P4, FGD2*

380 Third, men's supportive attitudes could be revealed if spouses are witnessed working  
381 together to make a living. Study participants pointed out that men with less supportive  
382 attitudes will not be able to work with women or wives but will instead leave all burden  
383 of work to their wives.



384 *"If you want to know that this man is supportive to his wife, you will find*  
385 *them working together in the places of production such as in business*  
386 *or at the farm. A man will not leave all work to her, but they cooperate.*  
387 *But if he is not supportive, you will see the opposite" P1, FGD5*

388 In addition to working together, some study participants pointed out that the  
389 communication style between men and women could reveal their supportive attitudes.  
390 For instance, if women are involved in decision making about any family matter, and  
391 they are addressed with respectful language. They pointed out that men who were not  
392 supportive, will not act respectfully, nor use good language when addressing women,  
393 or involve women in decision-making.

394 *"Supportive men are easily noticed by the way they communicate to*  
395 *women, involving them in deciding about any matter in the household*  
396 *or community and the respect they show to women. When you see men*  
397 *using good and respectful language when addressing women, or they*  
398 *give women priority when making decisions then you know they have*  
399 *supportive attitudes." P2, FGD9*

400 Fourth, some participants also alluded that looking at family size, and child spacing  
401 could hint at whether men are supportive of women or not. They said that a big family  
402 with many children indicated that a man was not supportive to his wife, could not plan  
403 together about the number of children to have or make decisions over sexual matters  
404 with his wife. A small family size and sufficient child spacing indicated that a man and  
405 woman were deciding together and listening to each other including on matters  
406 concerning when to have sex and children. It was also an indication that they plan  
407 together about childbearing.

408            *"[...] looking at the family structure like number of children, the age*  
409            *from one child to another will tell you what [type of] a man one is, and*  
410            *whether he supportive or not. For instance, if [he has] many children*  
411            *with little spacing then you know that this man does not listen to his*  
412            *wife... But if [he has] very few children, good child spacing, good health*  
413            *of his wife, that means that a man supports, listens, and decides*  
414            *together with wife even on matters related to having sex and children"*  
415            *P5, FGD1*

416    Lastly, some participants suggested that the wellbeing of the family and their related  
417    activities could be an indicator that both the man and wife support each other by  
418    planning together and deciding together on family priorities. Some men mentioned  
419    that, if given a chance and involved in decision making, women are good advisers and  
420    would lead to more successful implementation of family plans compared to when men  
421    work alone.

422

### 423    *3.3 Privacy, taboo and strategic concealment mask peer beliefs*

424    While publicly observable behaviors could be a reliable indicator of peer gender role  
425    ideology in some domains, participants also identified prominent blind spots. These  
426    include aspects of gender relations not easily visible in the everyday life of other men  
427    in the community. While some men felt a small family indicated a supportive husband  
428    (see above), the wider consensus was that how couples make decisions together about  
429    sex and reproduction is obscured from public view. On this theme, study participants  
430    pointed out that although in the past when Sukuma traditions and patriarchal values  
431    were strong, men had the final decision about how many children they needed to have,  
432    today women and men are exposed to new ideas, fostering new diversity in how these  
433    decisions get made. However, these decisions are regarded as a private affair between

434 men and women and thus not visible in everyday life, making it difficult to discern the  
435 beliefs of others.

436 *"In the past there was no family planning, men decided how many children*  
437 *they wanted, if this wife did not like it, then he would have children with other*  
438 *women or decide to marry another wife. But now women are educated and*  
439 *have information, and deciding over the number of children is complex. It is*  
440 *not easy to know the process of decision making, because it is done*  
441 *privately and remains private" P7, FGD1.*

442

443 *"We don't tell people about the decisions we make about the number of*  
444 *children we want, and I think no man or woman does that, it remains private.*  
445 *If couples were telling that in public, maybe they will end up not having*  
446 *even a single child, because there are also people in the community*  
447 *wishing bad things on you and you know them. This [decisions about*  
448 *having children] will remain private, no one will know it in public" P5, FGD8*

449

450 The second quote alludes to traditional beliefs that deem open discussion of intimate  
451 marital affairs, particularly with respect to plans about reproduction, as taboo. To have  
452 such discussions publicly may even make a couple the target of witchcraft or social  
453 exclusion. This is rooted in beliefs that in the community there is a mix of good and bad  
454 people, and it is often hard to recognize them. Bad people will not wish you well and  
455 will not be happy about your prosperity, which is manifested through reproductive  
456 success; with children viewed as vital in carrying forward a family's dreams, mission and  
457 destiny from generation to generation. As such, issues related to sex, pregnancy, and  
458 children are often undisclosed in public to avoid unnecessary harm from bad people.

459 The concept of witchcraft also emerged as one reason why a man may appear  
460 supportive of women, not because he has chosen to be supportive, but because he  
461 has been bewitched by his wife or a woman outside his family seeking to advance her  
462 own needs. This was a terrifying prospect for men, and shame surrounding such a  
463 situation would prevent men from revealing if their apparent support for women was  
464 genuine or because they had become under a woman's control.

465 *"We need to be cautious with women, supporting them may cost men's*  
466 *lives. Some men are helpless and hopeless now because they were*  
467 *bewitched by women. Some men have abandoned and forgotten their*  
468 *families because they are bewitched by other women. It is not that men*  
469 *don't want to support women, but sometimes the cost of doing so*  
470 *affects families. Some women bewitch their husbands to gain freedom*  
471 *and control, and their men can't say that in public because it is shame.*  
472 *You can only notice that because you see them deteriorating" P3, FGD9*

473  
474 More generally, participants noted that men are expected to strategically conceal or  
475 misrepresent personal beliefs and behaviors deemed supportive of women's  
476 empowerment for the purpose of avoiding negative social judgements. For example,  
477 participants expressed mixed personal views about whether men or women should  
478 have the final decision regarding sexual activity, but almost all participants did not feel  
479 confident and comfortable to speculate on the beliefs of others in this domain. Further  
480 probes to these aspects led to participants stating that having sex and decisions related  
481 to it are not only private affairs, but also that men are expected to misrepresent  
482 themselves to convey ideals of masculine strength.

483 *“Brother, this a difficult question [it is] not easy to get a correct answer*  
484 *from us, because only men are here. Having sex and who decides about*  
485 *it rests in the private life of the partners. Because that is done privately,*  
486 *it is not easy for us to know what goes on there, because they don’t*  
487 *come in public to tell us. But if you ask here, every man will say he has*  
488 *the final decision because he wants to be seen as strong, if women were*  
489 *also here, we would know the reality” P5, FGD3*

490  
491 Supporting this conjecture, men frequently raised a general concern that too much  
492 support for women leads to problems for society generally, and men specifically, such  
493 that men supporting women’s empowerment might be viewed as troublemakers.  
494 These sentiments may deter men from sharing their true beliefs. One participant  
495 furthermore argued that support for women increases male vulnerability to intimate  
496 partner violence.

497 *“We are talking about supporting and empowering women, but I think*  
498 *men need to take precautions when supporting. We have seen many*  
499 *examples in our society, women supported by men turning against their*  
500 *men or husbands. Some men are being beaten and mistreated by their*  
501 *wives, and they remain silent about these acts. This is because if you talk*  
502 *about it, fellow men will see you as weak, and an incomplete man, in*  
503 *short it is a shame. This is one of the reasons men do not want to support*  
504 *women, they are scared” P7, FGD9*

505  
506 Concerns over conveying masculine ideals of strength were also recognized as  
507 obscuring knowledge about what other men believe about divisions of household  
508 labor. While some men expressed readiness to allow women to work outside their

509 homes, most of them were not ready to participate in domestic work and chores. The  
510 main reason for their unreadiness was that participation in domestic chores would  
511 undermine their control, respect, and status; not only to their wives but also in the  
512 community at large. Some said that they were ready to allow their wives and female  
513 partners to go and work outside and then come back and do their domestic chores at  
514 home. However, this did not rule out the fact that there were some men who assisted  
515 their wives with domestic work secretly and did not want to talk about it publicly to  
516 protect their status.

517 *"I cannot stop my wife from going to work outside, doing some*  
518 *business, because she is bringing income and helping me. But when*  
519 *she is working outside in the business, I cannot do her domestic duties.*  
520 *I as a man cannot do the cooking, mopping, washing and other, she will*  
521 *have to come and do these duties herself. When we allow women to*  
522 *work, we don't mean they should leave their duties to men, no, no, they*  
523 *are still women and we are men" P1, FGD6*

524 *"Some of us and other men are cooking, washing and feeding children,*  
525 *they are doing domestic work even in presence of their wives, but they*  
526 *will do it while hiding, and can't talk about it to protect their status. No*  
527 *man will be respected when seen doing domestic work, he is just like a*  
528 *wife and no longer a man" P4, FGD2*

529  
530 Cultural changes in the community were also noted to be shifting the extent to which  
531 marital affairs were hidden from others, in some cases making previously private affairs  
532 between a husband and wife more publicly observable. Several participants alluded  
533 that in marital life or in sexual relationships, decisions about ending a marriage or

534 relationship, divorce or separation or marrying another woman are typically done in  
535 private and if reached properly in consensus, they remain private. As such, peer beliefs  
536 about male authority in adding a co-wife or separating remain obscured. However, with  
537 recent increases in women's agency these decisions are becoming more public. With  
538 ongoing cultural shifts in gender norms, men's power over marriage and relationships  
539 is more frequently being contested by women in a way that draws attention to others.  
540 Consequently, in today's world, if decisions are only made by one party, or the other  
541 party is compelled to accept the decision made by the first party, then it will be known  
542 in public, especially if wronged women seek community support.

543 *"Many years in the past, men were powerful and had a final decision*  
544 *over marriage, divorce or marrying another wife without seeking*  
545 *support or consensus from their wife. A wife could do nothing [other]*  
546 *than accepting men's decision. But in this modern society, men's power*  
547 *has been challenged, they have to discuss that with their wives and*  
548 *reach an agreement. When men force their decisions on their wives,*  
549 *things will be made public. Currently, women are empowered, they*  
550 *have education, and information. They can take such issues in court or*  
551 *other public places for hearing..." P3, FGD5.*

#### 552 553 4. DISCUSSION

554 We make an innovative contribution to studies of social learning (Kendal et al., 2018;  
555 Morgan et al., 2012) and gender socialization (John et al., 2017) by documenting how  
556 young men characterize their own understanding of peer beliefs. Participants  
557 demonstrated an ardent awareness of shifting gender norms in their community, with  
558 relatively egalitarian beliefs understood to be becoming more prevalent over time.  
559 They also demonstrated an awareness of the causes of these shifts, identifying forces

560 of urbanization, globalization, interactions with external agencies and the immigration  
561 of different ethnicities. These findings parallel with attitudinal surveys from the same  
562 community showing the greatest support for relatively egalitarian values among those  
563 most exposed to this suite of influences i.e. those with higher educational attainment  
564 and high-status occupations (Lawson et al., 2021, see also Palmero et al. 2020). Our  
565 work also supports observations from LMIC settings more generally that identify  
566 urbanization and globalization as key factors shifting the beliefs of young people  
567 (Birhan, 2019; John et al., 2017). Some participants also expressed that they felt  
568 'forced' to become more supportive of women's economic empowerment in particular,  
569 with women's wage labour not deemed inherently desirable, but rather a necessity to  
570 meet the demands of urbanization. This finding links to our previous research in the  
571 community suggesting that when women do earn more money they also become  
572 increasingly at risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, which may be interpreted  
573 as evidence of men's unhappiness with changing gender roles (Kilgallen et al 2021).  
574 Whatever the case, it is abundantly clear that cultural and economic change in the  
575 community has introduced novel diversity in gender role ideology, in turn introducing  
576 uncertainty in discerning peer beliefs.

577

578 On the one hand, high awareness of cultural change suggests that these shifts are  
579 meaningful, and this could be taken as support for the notion that lagged social  
580 information is a strong candidate explanation for why men overestimate peer support  
581 for inequitable gender norms in this context (Lawson et al., 2024), and many others  
582 (Barnett, 2023; Berkowitz et al., 2022; Berry-Cabán et al., 2020; Bursztyn et al., 2020,  
583 2023; Kilmartin et al., 2008; Sobotka, 2022). On the other hand, if men are particularly  
584 attuned to cultural change, we might expect them to be less vulnerable to this form of  
585 bias. Within a sample of men aged 20-45, Lawson et al. (2024) found that younger men



586 were more accurate in their perceptions of peer beliefs than older men. This pattern  
587 may be driven by adolescents and young adults individuals being especially attuned  
588 to monitoring peer beliefs and the anticipated ramifications of conformity (see also  
589 Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). Supporting this idea, several studies document a  
590 transition from reliance on social learning via parents in early life, and then via peers  
591 across childhood and adolescence, followed by growing reliance on individual  
592 learning in adulthood (Dempsey et al., 2012; Hewlett et al., 2011). However, to further  
593 test this speculation, we would need evidence that awareness of cultural change differs  
594 between generations.

595

596 When asked to elaborate on how they come to hold perceptions about peer beliefs,  
597 young men noted that some beliefs about gender were made clearly visible by  
598 behaviors in the public domain, while others were reflected only in the private affairs  
599 of women and men. In particular, participation in the labour market and the interaction  
600 of women and men in public places of work were viewed as reliable signals of another  
601 man's beliefs. In contrast, beliefs about decision-making authority in sex, marriage and  
602 reproduction were relatively obscured from others. This leads to the general  
603 conclusion that alternative aspects of gender role ideology may differ in their  
604 susceptibility to norm misperception. To our knowledge, this issue has rarely been  
605 explored in the supporting literature on gender norm misperception and deserves  
606 further investigation.

607

608 Lawson et al. (2024) also found that the degree of misperception varied across  
609 alternative domains of peer gender role ideology. However, somewhat at odds with  
610 the present study, peer views on women's labor market participation was among those  
611 domains most prone to misperception, with men estimating that their peers were

612 substantially more likely to disagree with statements supporting women's wage labour  
613 than we observed with both self and wife-reported men's beliefs (Lawson et al. 2024).  
614 This contradiction may be reconciled by distinguishing a man's *confidence* (measured  
615 qualitatively in this study) from his *accuracy* (measured in our previous quantitative  
616 investigation) in discerning peer beliefs. Men's confidence in this study may come from  
617 observing undeniable evidence that women are increasingly working outside of the  
618 home. In this sense, they have confidence that change in peer gender role ideology  
619 has occurred. Nevertheless, because shifts in employment patterns have been rapid,  
620 and in some cases described as 'forced' upon men, such that women may work without  
621 their husband being genuinely supportive, men still have trouble accurately assessing  
622 the specific proportion of their peers that hold supportive beliefs about women  
623 working outside of the home.

624

625 Whether or not aspects of peer gender role ideology were considered publicly  
626 observable or appropriate for consideration were also shaped by culturally specific  
627 notions of social taboo and witchcraft. This finding highlights the importance of gaining  
628 an ethnographic perspective, with modes of gender socialization and social learning  
629 likely to vary across time and space. Previous studies in the region have also observed  
630 taboos around open discussions of sexual activity especially for cross-generational  
631 discussions (Wight et al., 2006), which may further reinforce mismatched perceptions  
632 between younger and older people. Participants also noted cultural shifts in what is  
633 typically deemed private, with marital disputes now becoming public knowledge as  
634 women feel increasingly empowered to voice concerns that they may have traditionally  
635 kept private. If norm misperception is indeed a barrier to advancing women's  
636 empowerment, and privacy is a driver of norm misperception then this suggests a  
637 positive feedback mechanism at play; advances in women's empowerment make

638 community members more aware of one another's viewpoints, which in turn will reduce  
639 tendencies to overestimate peer support for inequitable norms, in turn incentivizing  
640 more support for women's empowerment.

641

642 Finally, our study strongly supports the hypothesis that men's concern about  
643 performing traditional ideals of masculinity contributes to norm misperception; with  
644 men acknowledging strategic concealment of emerging support for women's  
645 empowerment, in activities such as helping with domestic tasks, as a means to avoid  
646 negative social judgements from other men. Critically, this explanation may account  
647 not just for directional errors in misperception (i.e. individuals overestimating peer  
648 support for inequitable norms, rather than just being inaccurate), but men being more  
649 vulnerable to norm misperception than women (Barnett, 2023; Bursztyn et al., 2023).  
650 Further confidence in this explanation comes from studies across a range of contexts  
651 that document male anxiety over upholding traditional ideals of masculine strength  
652 (e.g. Badstue et al., 2020; Dery, 2019; Dery & Ganle, 2019; Mutebi, 2022), and the  
653 social costs they pay for violating norms (Kågesten et al., 2016). It is important to note,  
654 however that strategic misrepresentation may not always go in the direction of  
655 portraying oneself as supporting inequitable gender norms. Illustrating this point, in a  
656 recent study of Tanzanian men's reflections on sexual violence, Mchome (2023) notes  
657 study participants never admitted to committing IPV themselves, but reported such  
658 behaviors as being widespread by others. This was interpreted as men attempting to  
659 portray themselves favorably to researchers. Previous work has also shown evidence  
660 of such social desirability bias (or what is sometimes called self-presentation bias) in  
661 attitudinal surveys with men self-reporting much higher levels of support for women's  
662 empowerment than implied by asking men's wives to speculate on their husband's  
663 beliefs (Lawson et al., 2021). Thus, it seems plausible that misrepresentation of one's

664 own beliefs has the potential to lead to either an overestimation or underestimation of  
665 prevailing support for inequitable gender norms depending on what is socially  
666 desirable in the context.

667

668 Our analysis is not without limitations. Although data were collected by a Tanzanian  
669 research team and care was taken to make discussions comfortable places for sharing  
670 all perspectives, we are still outsiders to the community. Consequently, men may not  
671 have felt fully comfortable sharing their perspectives, especially since, as we have  
672 identified, some discussions surrounding gender are considered taboo. Future work  
673 may find deeper engagement with participant observation or individual in-depth  
674 interviews useful. It is also possible that men's shared notions of how to determine if a  
675 man is supportive of women may reflect an imitation of external scripts about women's  
676 empowerment. For example, the community have been exposed to programs  
677 promoting family planning, which may account for men identifying birth spacing as a  
678 sign of men supporting women, despite also describing decisions about sex and  
679 childbearing with their wives as a private affair, largely obscured from public view.  
680 Finally, while our dedicated focus on younger men was justified in this study, we can  
681 only speculate on how the potential causes of norm misperception differ by age and  
682 gender. The paucity of studies in the wider literature addressing women's ability to  
683 assess peer norms is particularly striking and should be addressed in future studies.

684

## 685 5. CONCLUSION

686 Adolescence to young adulthood is a particularly important time for social learning and  
687 identity formation. Our research sheds new light on how peer influence may be  
688 complicated by 'norm misperception' i.e. holding inaccurate perceptions about  
689 prevailing beliefs of one's peers. Recent research from a variety of cultural contexts

690 documents a routine tendency for men to overestimate peer support for inequitable  
691 gender norms. Here, we present data consistent with two candidate explanations for  
692 this phenomenon; (i) rapid cultural shifts towards more equitable gender norms lead  
693 individuals to hold outdated beliefs about one another; and (ii) the role of strategic  
694 concealment of emerging support for women's empowerment to avoid social costs of  
695 deviating from traditional ideals about masculinity. Our findings also suggest that  
696 future research would do well to disaggregate broad concepts of women's  
697 empowerment to consider how alternative dimensions of gender relations may be  
698 differentially susceptible to norm misperception. We anticipate that this will depend  
699 critically on culturally and temporally specific patterns of how social information is  
700 produced and transmitted.

701

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