

Unmasking the Silent Crisis: How Socioeconomic and Cultural Forces Perpetuate Multidimensional Child Poverty in Tanzania

Aidan Laurent Sunday¹, Nor Malina Malek^{2*}

¹Development Planning and Management Section, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia;

Department of Economics, Faculty of Social Sciences, Mzumbe University, Morogoro, Tanzania.

Email: aidansunday@student.usm.my

²Development Planning and Management Section, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia

Email: malina@usm.my

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Nor Malina Malek
(malina@usm.my)

KEYWORDS:

Child Poverty
Multidimensional Child Poverty
Deprivation
Tanzania

CITATION:

Sunday, A. L., & Nor Malina Malek. (2025).
Unmasking the Silent Crisis: How
Socioeconomic and Cultural Forces
Perpetuate Multidimensional Child Poverty
in Tanzania. *Malaysian Journal of Social
Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 10(2),
e003285.
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v10i2.3285>

ABSTRACT

This paper systematically reviews the literature on multidimensional child poverty to provide insight into the socio-economic and cultural factors behind it in Tanzania. Recognising the pressing need to understand child-specific deprivations, the study has employed a structured methodology based on the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. The review process aimed to search for terms using the Population, Interventions, Comparison and Outcome (PICO) framework, which included keywords such as “child poverty”, “multidimensional child poverty”, “child deprivation”, and “multidimensional child deprivation”. The paper sourced data from two high-impact databases, Web of Science and Scopus. To ensure rigour in the selection, we followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, narrowing down an initial set of 427 publications to 238 by applying filters on duplicates, relevance, and publication date to reduce this number to only 238. These were supplemented with 16 reports from the United Republic of Tanzania, the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank to ensure a comprehensive view of the subject. Using thematic analysis, this review summarised household composition, traditional gender roles, parental education, household income inequalities, and rural-urban differences as the main factors affecting multidimensional child poverty from the selected studies. These findings highlight the diverse determinants of multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania, identifying a necessity for tailored intervention integrating socio-economic and cultural factors to address this persistent issue.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on multidimensional child poverty. Using PICO and PRISMA frameworks, it provides a comprehensive systematic review of the socio-economic and cultural factors behind multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions that address the diverse determinants of multidimensional child poverty.

1. Introduction

Nestled in the eastern part of Africa, Tanzania is one of the world's youthful nations (UNICEF, 2021). Almost half (49%) of its 61 million residents are children aged 0-17 years (URT, 2022). However, behind this youthful facade, a silent crisis looms – child poverty. In Tanzania, child poverty is not just a statistic; it is a profound and pervasive crisis that demands immediate attention. It should be noted that the definition of children in this paper captures individuals aged 0-17 years in accordance with the United Nations General Assembly (1989) and the United Republic of Tanzania (2019b). According to the Tanzanian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2023a), it affects 94% of the 30 million children in the country, a decline from 99% in the year 2007. This implies that 94% of all children in the country have experienced at least one deprivation in the form of living in overcrowded and unsafe housing conditions, inadequate nutrition, poor health, and a lack of safe water and sanitation, stunting their physical growth and development. Further deprivations have also been experienced in education, protection and communication.

According to the NBS and UNICEF (2023a), a child is said to live in multidimensional poverty if deprived of at least three dimensions: housing, protection, communication, nutrition, water and sanitation, health, and education. Based on this, statistics show that 31% of children in the country are multidimensionally poor, with the worst situation being in the Kagera and Rukwa regions, where 44% of children in each of these regions have experienced at least three deprivations in the aforementioned dimensions (NBS & UNICEF, 2023a, 2023b). The effects of multidimensional child poverty are not just immediate but long-term, setting a stage for a lifetime of disadvantages and vulnerability. For instance, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) adults who grew up in the grip of multidimensional child poverty are projected to earn (in terms of annual income) about a third less than their peers (WHO et al., 2018). This diminishes their ability to improve their quality of life, creating a poverty cycle that limits their households' prosperity, personal wealth creation and the nation's broader economic growth.

The impact of poverty is particularly severe on children, far more than on adults. For instance, despite making up just one-third of the global population, children account for half of those living on less than USD 2.15 a day, making them disproportionately and critically vulnerable to the harsh impacts of poverty compared to adults (UNICEF, 2023). In addition, children depend on others for care and support, making them society's most vulnerable group (Oh, 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023). Considering that 90% of the Tanzanian population does not have adequate protection in place to mitigate the impacts of life contingencies and livelihood shocks, including sudden and insignificant disruptions to income sources and deprivation, children's welfare is even riskier (UNICEF, 2021). This underscores the importance of focusing on this age group from moral and fairness considerations (Bárcena-Martín et al., 2017). By narrowly separating the study of poverty from the general population to focus on children, it allows us to focus, better understand and address their specific needs (Ferrone & de Milliano, 2018).

According to Bessell (2022), studying child poverty without an explicit intent to bring about positive change would be morally unacceptable. This emphasises the need for knowledge creation that translates into action. In this view, this paper adds to the existing discussion of multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania by accentuating the need for greater attention and consideration of this specific group within the broader poverty discourse. Additionally, the paper uncovers various social, economic and cultural factors

stipulated in literature and how they can perpetuate multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania, underscoring the ethical imperative to understand and alleviate child poverty.

2. Research Methods

This paper employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to search for and select publications to present its discussions. Given the complexity and exhaustiveness involved in searching, selecting, and reviewing the literature, the SLR provides a structured approach to simplifying the search and selection process in accordance with the study's objectives (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2023). The SLR strategy used in this paper is divided into three categories: the search strategy, selection strategy and data analysis.

2.1. Search Strategy

The search strategy followed the Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome (PICO) model to structure the search terms. The paper's target population is children in Tanzania, and the interventions are the socioeconomic and cultural determinants, whereas the outcome is multidimensional child poverty. In this regard, the search included literature with the following keywords: child poverty, multidimensional child poverty, child deprivation, and multidimensional child deprivation. We purposively used two academic databases, Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, to obtain high-impact publications. To expand our search, we included government reports, legal acts and reports from recognised reputable international organisations (the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank) regarding the situation of multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania. Publications that ignored children or purely focused on unidimensional poverty were excluded.

2.2 Selection Strategy

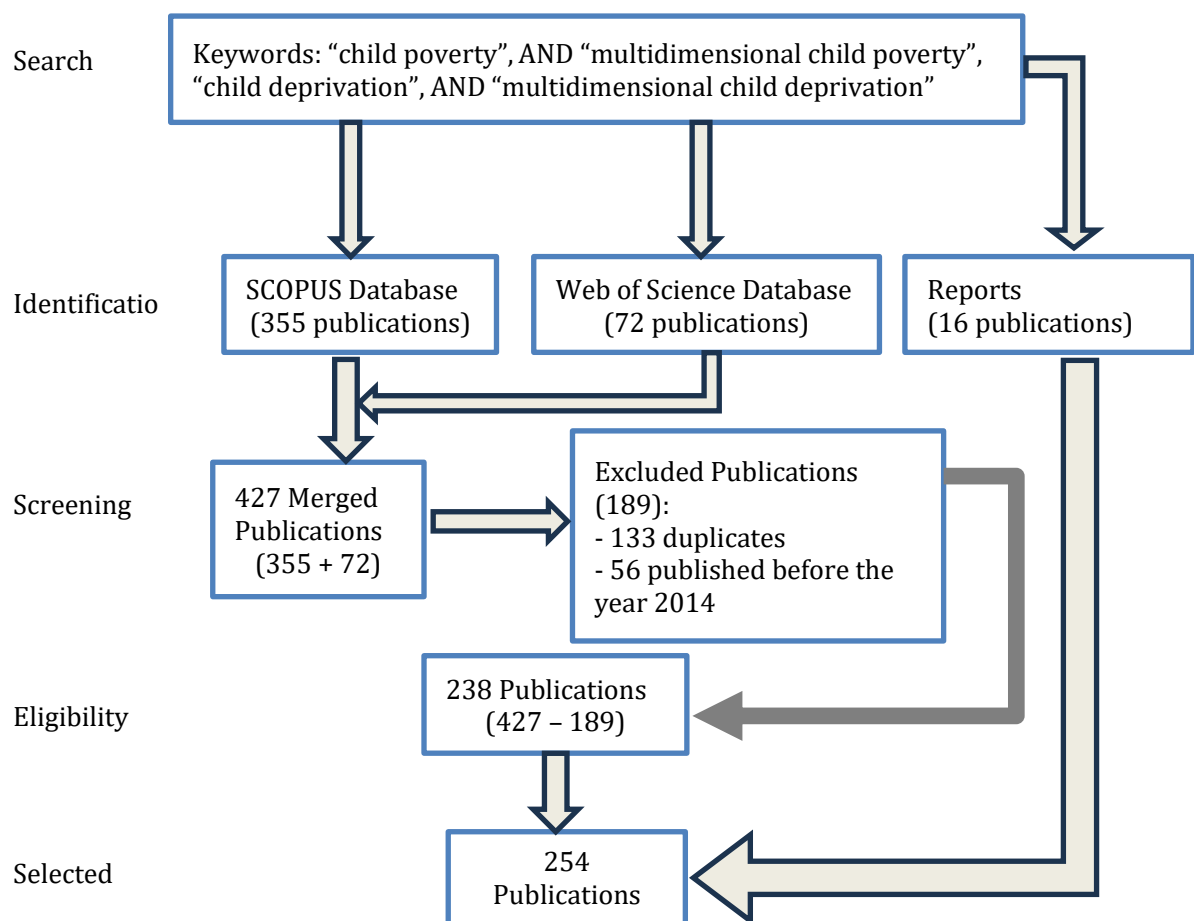
The selection strategy followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. This involved the collection of 427 publications from the year 1979 to 2024 in the Scopus and WoS databases using the keywords and titles identified in section 2.1. The publications were further analysed based on their titles, abstracts, the existence of duplicates and year of publication. Following these criteria, we identified and deleted 133 duplicate publications and dropped 56 others published more than ten years ago (older than 2014). The remaining 238 publications (2014-2024) were supplemented with 16 other reports from the United Republic of Tanzania, the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank to make a total of 254 publications, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1: Publication Types Used in The Review

Publication Type	Description	Number
Articles	These are fully peer-reviewed research papers published in academic journals.	205
Article: early access	These articles have been peer-reviewed, accepted, and published online before being assigned to a specific journal issue.	3
Book	These are comprehensive works on a particular subject, often consisting of a deep dive into a topic, theory, or research area.	1

Book chapter	A chapter within a larger edited book. Each chapter is typically written by different authors who contribute their expertise on a particular aspect of the book's broader theme.	16
Conference Papers	These are research papers presented at academic conferences.	4
Editorial Articles	These are publications written by journal editors or invited experts, these articles provide commentary on the journal's issue, emerging trends, or reflections on a topic.	2
Note	These are brief pieces of research or observations that are less comprehensive than full research articles.	1
Review Papers	These papers synthesise existing research on a specific topic, summarizing findings from multiple studies.	6
Total Publications from the WoS and SCOPUS		238
Other Reviewed Reports	These include reports from the government of the United Republic of Tanzania, legal acts and reports from the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank.	16
Total Publications Reviewed		254

Figure 1: The Review Approach Flowchart



2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis strategy followed a thematic analysis, which included identifying common themes across studies. The identified themes in the literature were further examined to uncover their relationship and simultaneity of occurrence. The key terms, their overlaps, and their relationship to multidimensional child poverty were closely studied. From these and a careful review of the publications, the determinants of multidimensional child poverty were further identified, compared, and reflected to ensure consistency and regional specificity.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses various cultural and socioeconomic factors affecting multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania. It examines how household size and composition, traditional role assignments, parental education, household income, and rural-urban stratification impact the overall well-being of children in the country. The insights presented are drawn from a thorough analysis of the review publications, which are discussed in detail in section 2.3.

3.1. Cultural Factors

3.1.1. Household Size and Composition

In many cultures, parents naturally view having many children as a way to ensure financial stability and emotional support in old age. This is also evident in Tanzania, where 71% of households have at least one child, and 21.9% of those households have more than three children under the age of 18 years ([Ministry of Finance and Planning et al., 2024](#)). The situation is more pronounced in the rural parts of Tanzania, which have a tradition of larger family sizes with an average fertility rate of 5.5 births per woman compared to the global and national averages of 2.5 and 4.5 births per woman, respectively ([Ministry of Health et al., 2022](#); [United Nations, 2020](#)). Large household sizes may also be attributed to extended families and living with non-relatives as sources of social support ([Fonta et al., 2020](#); [Leu et al., 2016](#)). According to the [United Nations \(2019\)](#), Tanzania ranks third globally, with 11% of households living with a non-relative, behind the Côte d'Ivoire at 12% and the Maldives at 14%. While this may have worked in the agrarian communities, in today's economy, larger families can mean an increased current financial burden, a higher need to divide attention and resources among each child, and a reduced capacity to invest in other essential welfare aspects such as savings, education, healthcare, and retirement planning ([Leu et al., 2016](#); [Pradhan et al., 2022](#)). In this regard, if poor households are strained under economic pressures, the vulnerability of children within their households will increase. This is seen in Ghana, where an increase in the number of children in the household translates into an increase in child poverty ([Agyire-Tettey et al., 2021](#)).

The composition of households is a critical factor in predicting multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania. While [Ferrone and de Milliano \(2018\)](#) found poor and deprived children to be more likely to live in female-headed households, they found no statistically significant relationship between the gender of the household head and child deprivation status in the country. However, when considering monetary poverty, [Ballón et al. \(2018\)](#) found that female-headed households in Tanzania are 47.1% more likely to experience monetary poverty than male-headed households. This disparity underscores the

challenges faced by female-headed households in accessing resources and opportunities. It highlights the need for targeted interventions to address gender-based economic inequalities in the country.

The aforementioned findings are not just country-specific; in Europe, a child is more likely to be deprived if the head of the household is a woman or an immigrant ([Bárcena-Martín et al., 2017](#)). Additionally, children living with married couples in Botswana are less likely to be multidimensionally poor compared to those in households managed by other children and youths ([Lekobane & Roelen, 2020](#)). On the other hand, in India, male children and those of higher birth order are more likely to encounter multidimensional poverty than their female counterparts ([Pradhan et al., 2023](#)). Contrary to these findings can be seen in Ethiopia, where male-headed households are more likely to be multidimensionally poor than female-headed households, and boys are more likely to be poor than girls ([Belete, 2021](#)). These findings shed light on the complex dynamics of gender and family structure in the context of multidimensional child poverty.

3.1.1. Traditional Role Assignments

Gendered traditions can anchor girls to home and fields while boys sail ahead in education, perpetuating a cycle that keeps potential bound and progress uneven. According to the Tanzanian Social Institutions and Gender Index Report by [OECD \(2022\)](#)¹, most women aged over 15 years (91%) frequently engaged in basic household tasks during their teenage years. In contrast, only 63% of men in the same age group reported performing these tasks regularly. The advocates of these traditions see teaching girls their place in the home as necessary for them to one day manage a prosperous household – something they insist is essential to every community. For this reason, women spend three hours more daily than men in unpaid domestic work, and 68% of Tanzanians noted that young girls aged 7 to 15 in their households consistently participate in household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings ([OECD, 2022](#)). In contrast, only 43% said the same for boys. The critics of this mindset argue that this cultural bias keeps a large number of women and girls poor and of less decision-making autonomy, ensuring that they cannot function without the help of men; basically, this vulnerability is passed on to the next generations ([UN Women, 2024](#)).

The legal frameworks in Tanzania present conflicting stances towards reducing multidimensional child poverty, particularly towards equitable education and gender roles. The Law of the Child Act Revised Edition ([United Republic of Tanzania, 2019b](#)) and the National Education Act ([United Republic of Tanzania, 1978](#)) emphasise equal access to education for both male and female children. However, the Law of Marriage Act Revised Edition ([United Republic of Tanzania, 2019a](#)) allows girls to be married at the tender age of 15 years, while boys can marry at 18 years. It is thus not surprising that 22% of all adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 years in the country have had at least one pregnancy ([Ministry of Health et al., 2022](#)). According to the Ministry of Health et al. (2022) and the [World Health Organization \(2024\)](#), Tanzania's adolescent (aged 15 to 19) fertility rate of 112 births per 1000 is almost three times more than the global average of 41.3 births per 1000. The high rates of teenage pregnancies and life beds not only limit girls' education potential but also come with a greater health risk for these young children.

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Traditional gender roles have a more significant impact on girls, but it is essential to recognise that boys are also vulnerable (Ferrone & de Milliano, 2018). According to Ballón et al. (2018), young boys in Tanzania are 6.2% more likely than girls to drop out of school or experience poor academic performance due to child labour. This aspect highlights the broader implications of traditional gender roles beyond their effects on girls. However, this also underscores the potential for change through initiatives targeting these inequalities. Peru has demonstrated this potential for change with efforts such as banning child marriage and annulling marriages of young girls who were married as minors (UNICEF, 2023). This success story should serve as a source of hope and motivation for policymakers and NGOs working towards poverty alleviation in Tanzania, showing that change is possible and within reach.

3.2. Socioeconomic Factors

3.2.1. Parental Education

Parents with low levels of education often struggle to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to provide appropriate care for their children (Belete, 2021). Research has shown that this lack of educational background can hinder their understanding of child development, health guidelines, and effective parenting strategies (Bárcena-Martín et al., 2017; Leu et al., 2016; Pradhan et al., 2023). As a result, these parents may unintentionally overlook essential aspects of their children's emotional, physical, and cognitive needs, which can impact their children's overall well-being and development (Guillén-Fernández & Vargas-Chanes, 2021). In Tanzania, children living in households where the head of the family has not received any formal education tend to experience higher rates of both financial and multidimensional poverty (NBS & UNICEF, 2023a).

Statistics indicate that as mothers' education levels rise, several essential health outcomes also improve (Ministry of Health et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2021). According to the Ministry of Health et al. (2022), as mothers' education levels increase in the country, there is an increase in the percentage of women who attend the recommended (at least four) antenatal care visits, those who take iron-containing supplements during pregnancy, and those who ensure their live births are protected against neonatal tetanus. Additionally, a rise in mothers' education levels results in a higher percentage of mothers receiving postnatal checks within two days of giving birth and reduces the child's deprivation of nutrition and water dimensions (Ministry of Health et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2021). In this regard, a mother's education is crucial in enhancing a child's health and reducing the potential cycle of poverty arising from the findings by the WHO et al. (2018), which show that an adult who experienced childhood poverty is expected to earn a third less than their peers.

A father's education level is also closely related to the child's prosperity in terms of education and protection. According to Ballón et al. (2018), a father's education significantly affects a child's school enrolment decision more than a mother's education in Tanzania. In addition, the United Nations Children's Fund (2021) further shows that an increase in a father's education offers strong protection against child labour in Tanzania. While these statistics raise critical questions on the influence of gender roles and parental influences on education attainment in Tanzania, they also highlight that fathers' education is essential in fostering a nurturing environment that encourages children to pursue their studies instead of working, ultimately aiming for a brighter future.

3.2.2. Household Income

Household income plays a critical role in understanding multidimensional child poverty as a predictor of its occurrence and an outcome of various socioeconomic factors. A higher household income often correlates with better access to essential resources such as nutrition, education, and healthcare, reducing the likelihood of children experiencing multidimensional poverty (Cuesta et al., 2021; Kim & Nandy, 2018; Sánchez et al., 2024). Conversely, when children live in environments marked by multidimensional poverty, it can lead to lower household income levels due to limited employment opportunities and reduced economic mobility (Sánchez et al., 2024). This complex interaction highlights the importance of addressing income levels and the broader aspects of child poverty to create effective solutions.

In Tanzania, studies have shown that low income is one of the predisposing factors for multidimensional child poverty (Ballón et al., 2018; Ferrone & de Milliano, 2018). According to Ballón et al. (2018), a 1% increase in household monetary resources decreases the probability that a child suffers from education deprivation by 6.4% and increases the probability that a child has a standard progression through school grades by 5.8%. Ge and Wang (2019) suggest that these effects may stem from chaotic home environments faced by children living in multidimensional child poverty (unlike their richer counterparts), making it difficult for them to concentrate. Such poor conditions may reduce their willingness and ability to participate in activities like learning and achieving goals. It is thus not surprising that Bárcena-Martín et al. (2017) and Weon et al. (2024) found that home ownership is associated with a lesser probability of child deprivation across Europe and South Korea. While this correlation may not necessarily reflect the situation in Tanzania – due to differing economic, cultural, and social factors – it is an important observation that should be considered when examining child welfare in various contexts.

In addition, studies in Tanzania have shown that as a household's income rises, the likelihood of a child experiencing stunting decreases (Ballón et al., 2018). According to the Ministry of Health et al. (2022), 30%, 12%, and 3% of children under five in Tanzania are stunted, underweight, and wasted, respectively. This situation can be linked to the fact that many of these children live in low-income households, with statistics showing that 95% of the Tanzanian population is deprived of at least one poverty indicator, and about half of the population is deprived of five poverty indicators (World Bank, 2018). Additionally, 90% of households in the country lack mechanisms to cope with unexpected income shocks and deprivations (UNICEF, 2021). As a result, many families struggle to access nutritious food, healthcare, and supportive environments essential for a child's healthy growth.

3.2.3. Rural-Urban Disparities

Rural areas remain at the heart of Tanzania's struggle with poverty compared to urban areas (UNICEF, 2021). According to the NBS and UNICEF (2023a), children in rural parts of Tanzania are nearly always at a higher risk of experiencing both financial and multidimensional poverty. Statistics reveal alarming disparities in education and protection dimensions; rural children are more than three times more likely to be out of school and over three times more likely to have unregistered births than their urban counterparts (UNICEF, 2021). While educational deprivation impacts their future career prospects, having unregistered births creates legal and social disadvantages throughout their lives, perpetuating a cycle of poverty. In the water and sanitation dimension, the

situation is more dire as a staggering 91% of rural children are deprived of water and sanitation compared to 62% and 61% in other urban areas and Dar es Salaam, respectively (NBS & UNICEF, 2023a). The deprivation of basic sanitation and clean water contributes to health problems and exacerbates the cycle of poverty these children face. While rural areas remain the face of poverty in Tanzania, urban poverty is also notable (UNICEF, 2021). Urban areas are known to have better infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, and access to healthcare facilities that are crucial to a child's prosperity (Kamal et al., 2019; Pradhan et al., 2023). Despite these advantages, statistics reveal surprising results where children born in urban areas of Tanzania are two times more likely to die in the first month of life compared to those born in rural areas (UNICEF, 2021). This implies that combating child poverty is complex and goes beyond providing access to facilities. Understanding such complexities is thus crucial for developing effective interventions to support children in both rural and urban areas.

Regional child development imbalances are not unique to Tanzania. According to Musiwa (2019) and Belete (2021), rural children and those in marginalised settings in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia are more likely to experience multidimensional poverty compared to their urban counterparts. Similarly, children living in provinces near the borders face more significant deprivations in Iran than in the country's central regions (Kamal et al., 2019). In South Korea, children in rural areas are almost more than three times to experience multidimensional poverty compared to those living in metropolitan areas (Weon et al., 2024).

4. Conclusion

This systematic review unmasked the silent crisis persisting in quiet corners, where children's aspirations are tempered by forces that existed well before their births. In the intricate tapestry of multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania, five forces emerged as particularly important in shaping the lives of the country's youngest citizens. These are household size and composition, traditional roles assigned by age or sex (typically a combination), parental education level, income levels at the household scale, and rural-urban stratification patterns. Each of these factors weaves its way through families' everyday struggles, sustaining generational cycles of deprivation that deny children their full potential.

In rural families with scarce resources, traditions shape how roles are divided. Older kids, particularly girls, often step into responsibilities at a young age, limiting their time for school and play. This situation is closely tied to parental education; when parents are unaware of other options, their children's futures may seem constrained. However, multidimensional child poverty is not only about what happens within the home but is also shaped by where these families live. Moving from a rural area to a town or city can bring new opportunities, yet inequalities persist. While urban areas tend to have better infrastructure and services, newborns in urban areas face a higher risk of dying in their first month than those in rural areas. Recognising these forces is the step toward imagining a future where multidimensional child poverty's weave is loosened, and a new story is crafted – one where every child, no matter their background, has a chance to thrive. The path to ending multidimensional child poverty in all its forms across Tanzania is complex but vital, and it begins with understanding the patterns that keep so many from moving forward. Only through this understanding can we create targeted interventions and policies that empower children and families, fostering a more equitable and prosperous future for all.

Despite providing insight into the socio-economic and cultural drivers of multidimensional child poverty in Tanzania, the study is not without shortcomings. It is mainly based on two major databases, Web of Science and Scopus, which may have missed relevant research at the local or regional levels, especially those published in Swahili, Grey literature, and less well-publicised works. On the other hand, while thematic analysis is a structured approach to identifying patterns in data, it relies heavily on the researchers' interpretations, which can introduce subjectivity. In this regard, the study may fail to reflect the depth and complexity of how factors such as household composition and gender roles influence multidimensional child poverty.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

Acknowledgement

The authors express their gratitude to the Universiti Sains Malaysia for its technical support.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding this study.

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