

A CROSS ANTHROPOLOGICO-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED AFRICAN PROVERBS AS EVIDENCE OF A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

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Abstract

Proverbs are short, pithy sayings that contain the treasures of traditional wisdom which are passed down from one generation to another. In some concrete way, they are the bedrock upon which societies build their civilization. Stone (2006: xiii) defines proverbs as 'bits of ancient wisdom' that represent words of critical wisdom based on the tested experience of ancestors. As an integral part of language, proverbs reflect the patterns and structures of culture and consequently influence human thinking, psyche, world view, social practices and power relations in society (Djite, 2008). Employing Lakoff and Turner's (1989) theory of ethnography of proverbs and Lazar's (2005) approach to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), this paper examines selected proverbs from some African societies (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Amharic, Bukusu, Frafra etc.) in order to determine if the African society has a history of patriarchy and violence that ultimately promotes a culture of gender-based violence (GBV). The study reveals that proverbs with violent overtones are found in several African societies. These proverbs have the power to subtly influence speakers' attitudes and behaviour towards women, especially when it comes to upholding patriarchal hegemony.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Culture, Gender-Based Violence, Proverbs

Introduction

It has been argued that society generally tends to underestimate the power of women, often leading to the false assumption that women either lack power altogether or that their power is inferior to that of men (Wodak, 2008). Proverbs, as a cultural tool employed by society to instil guided behaviour, are not exempt from the elaborate and pervasive social infrastructure that reinforces this notion. Proverbs are considered to provide advice and life lessons on the behaviour of men and women in society and may significantly impact individuals' social and emotional well-being. They project cultural and societal expectations, being age-old yet still valued in contemporary times. Mieder (2007:18) asserts that proverbs pass judgement and prescribe appropriate behaviour for the future. Similarly, Mulaudzi (2013:154) contends that proverbs are cultural constructs that dictate values and norms for both men and women.

According to Hussein (2005), language is a symbolic means of both representing and valuing ideas. Just as a dance is inseparable from its performer, our attitudes towards subjects and the manner in which we discuss them are inextricably linked. In other words, a society's perception of men and women is reflected in the proverbs that surround them. In many African societies, as in most societies worldwide, gender power relations tend to be expressed in proverbs, which often exacerbate the subordination of women and perpetuate their disadvantaged position. Many African proverbs contain messages that sustain male

supremacy in both private and public spheres. The influence of proverbs on African thought is profound to the extent that even the construction of gender as a social concept admits the notion of male superiority and female subordination. African proverbs serve as conduits of this imbalance. For the purpose of clarity and guidance, three key concepts—Proverb, Patriarchy, and Gender-Based Violence (henceforth referred to as GBV)—as used in this paper, require brief definitions.

Proverbs

A proverb is a saying, statement, or expression of collective wisdom, containing truth, moral guidance, experience, or advice concerning life in a metaphysical, fixed, and memorisable form, handed down from generation to generation (Etta & Mogu, 2012). Proverbs serve as tools in the philosophical pursuit of knowledge, reality, and wisdom. They are widely accepted as having educational, cautionary, or advisory purposes within a population. When skilfully employed, they can be powerful instruments that either divide and weaken or unite and strengthen. According to Esen (1982), proverbs function as verbal archives of a community's ideas and philosophy, akin to an oral museum. Similarly, Akporobaro and Emovon (1994:1) argue that "the proverbs of a community or nation constitute, in a real sense, an ethnography of the people, which, if systematised, can provide a penetrating insight into their way of life, philosophy, moral truths, and social values."

Through the use of proverbs expressed in indigenous languages, the knowledge systems of a people are defined, clarified, and transmitted. Proverbs offer a window into the mindset, worldview, thought processes, and beliefs of a community. In traditional African society, elders are revered as custodians of cultural wisdom. These elders, who are often male figures representing the power elite within the community, are instrumental in the transmission of proverbs. Consequently, the epistemic authority in proverbs is frequently aligned with elitism, masculinity, and patriarchy. Elders utilise proverbs to reinforce their points, leading to the common assertion that "proverbs are the oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 2006). It is believed that these elders, possessing deep linguistic and cultural knowledge, are closest to the divine source of wisdom and thus more likely to articulate truths. Proverbs, therefore, serve as a medium for conveying what is regarded as traditional African knowledge, acting as a means by which individuals—especially men—attempt to assert control over their environment and social relationships. According to Uduigwomen (2002), proverbs function as tools for socialisation and formal education in many African societies, while also serving as mechanisms for the preservation of cultural traditions.

Patriarchy

In the context of this study, patriarchy is understood as the institutionalisation of power dynamics that establish and maintain male supremacy (Lakoff, 2004). This system marginalises and subjugates women's interests, whether through explicit or implicit manifestations of male dominance in social, political, and economic spheres, or through restrictions on women's mobility, access to education, and opportunities for personal growth. Studies indicate that despite the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 by various nations, including Nigeria, and the implementation of local gender policies (such as Nigeria's 2006 National Gender Policy), gender inequality persists. This continued disparity is largely due to entrenched cultural and structural challenges that hinder women's participation in all aspects of life, with significant consequences for human resource development, economic progress, and overall gender equality (see Ali and Naylor, 2013; Bako and Syed, 2018; Strid and Hearn, 2022).

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to violence directed at an individual or group based on their gender

identity. While it was historically perceived as limited to acts of violence perpetrated by men against women, contemporary understandings recognise that GBV encompasses hostilities based on gender identity and sexual orientation, including violence against men who do not conform to dominant expressions of masculinity (Collins, 2014). More broadly, GBV encompasses "any interpersonal, organisational, or politically motivated violation perpetrated against individuals due to their gender identity, sexual orientation, or position within male-dominated social structures such as the family, military, workplace, or labour force" (O'Toole and Schiffman, 1997: xii).

Collins (2014) argues that the rise of Western feminism in the 1970s played a pivotal role in bringing attention to the prevalence of violence against women, shaping contemporary discourse on GBV. During this period, high rates of sexual violence against women were exposed, and such violence was theorised as an intrinsic feature of patriarchy. For instance, some theorists posited that rape functioned as a mechanism through which men, as a social group, maintained their dominance over women. Although modern discussions are less conspiratorial, they continue to acknowledge the undeniable link between GBV and the broader social structures of gender inequality.

Empirical Review

Numerous studies have examined gender-related proverbs from various perspectives. **Hussein (2005)** explores how African proverbs contribute to the construction and perpetuation of gendered cultural norms. Using **postmodern power dynamics theory**, the study analyses selected sexist proverbs to determine how language mediates social relationships. Hussein argues that African proverbs reinforce **gender stereotypes** by associating **masculinity** with strength, respect, and authority, while equating **femininity** with weakness, meekness, and inconsistency. He further suggests that such proverbs depict men as **prototypes of humanity**, relegating women to a secondary status. Consequently, men often use these biases to justify their dominance over women.

Phiri, Mulaudzi, and Heyns (2015) investigate the impact of the indigenous proverb *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* on women's **mental health**. Using **snowball and purposive sampling**, they selected **57 women** (married, divorced, widowed, and single) who participated in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in Tshwane and Johannesburg. The study reveals that the proverb **perpetuates oppression and stigmatisation**, leading to **psychological distress and, in extreme cases, fatal consequences**. Some

women reported multiple forms of oppression and feared being socially ostracised if they sought divorce. Others lived in constant fear of domestic violence. The findings also indicate that the proverb **reinforces the expectation that women must endure hardships to sustain their marriages**, reflecting deeply ingrained patriarchal values.

Gyan, Abbey, and Baffoe (2020) examine the representation of women in **Akan proverbs** and how they institutionalise **women's roles and identities** in traditional Akan society, Ghana. Their study highlights the role of **oral traditions in perpetuating patriarchal norms and gender inequalities**. The authors advocate for a **radical restructuring of oral traditions** to dismantle the frameworks that sustain **patriarchal discourse and gender-based discrimination**.

Research on **Zulu proverbs** provides both **interpretive and descriptive analyses**, revealing how these proverbs reinforce **patriarchal norms** that restrict women's rights (Nyembezi, 1990). **Baloyi (2017)** finds that many Zulu proverbs prescribe specific gender expectations that hinder women's personal development, particularly within **marriage and leadership roles**. Similarly, **Chiliza and Masuku (2020)** examine **gender inequality** in Zulu proverbs, arguing that the **Zulu cultural setting positions men as dominant and women as subordinate**. Their study highlights how these proverbs **reinforce long-standing stereotypes**, portraying women as **inferior, submissive, and objects of subjugation**.

Studies on **Yoruba proverbs** yield similar conclusions. **Adegbola (2021)** and **Balogun (2010)** argue that many Yoruba proverbs **violate women's rights and dignity** by employing **derogatory metaphors** that influence attitudes and behaviours, ultimately **upholding male hegemony**. The scholars assert that proverbs, alongside other **cultural tools**, have historically functioned as mechanisms of **women's oppression and subjugation**. They advocate for **replacing misogynistic proverbs with gender-inclusive alternatives**.

Extensive research on **gender-related proverbs in Ethiopia** further supports these findings. **Assefa (2016)** explores **linguistic violence** against women through **sexist Amharic proverbs**, while **Gebeyehu (2019)** examines **negative portrayals of women in Awngi proverbs**. **Jobo (2015)** focuses on **biased depictions of femininity in Wolaita proverbs**, highlighting their role in reinforcing **gender-based discrimination**.

Baataar et al. (2023) analyse proverbs from the **Frafra traditional area of Ghana**, demonstrating their **significant impact on gender relations**. While some proverbs depict men as **brave, resilient providers and protectors**, others reinforce the stereotype of **women as dependent, vulnerable, and subordinate**. Additionally, Frafra proverbs **highlight the struggles and endurance of women**, portraying them as **nurturing and industrious** yet subjected to **harassment and oppression**.

The existing literature clearly shows that numerous African proverbs, rooted in **patriarchal traditions**, contribute to **women's oppression, marginalisation, and devaluation**. However, **limited attention has been given to proverbs that may incite or legitimise violence against women**, despite the widely acknowledged rhetorical power of proverbs in shaping **moral consciousness, social beliefs, and behavioural norms** (Akporobaro & Emovon, 1994). Furthermore, **many gender studies have focused on specific ethnic groups**, limiting broader insights into the **ethnocultural foundations of proverbial misogyny** across Africa. **This study aims to bridge that gap** by providing a **comparative and cross-cultural analysis** of African proverbs that may encourage gender-based violence.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The African proverbs analysed in this study were sourced from various published and unpublished materials. Given that a single proverb can have multiple interpretations depending on context, those related to gender-based violence (GBV) were selected based on their most apparent and direct meanings. This study relies on secondary sources, which include newspaper articles, book and film reviews, and scholarly journal articles that discuss or evaluate original research. As Haralambos (2013) explains, secondary sources describe, interpret, analyse, and summarise primary sources.

Relevant materials on "African proverbs that encourage violence against women" were identified through desk research using search engines such as Google, MSN, Lycos, and Yahoo. Search terms were refined to include synonyms and variations, such as "African proverbs that justify beating women" and "proverbs that support the oppression of women." The selected materials primarily examined gender construction and the portrayal of women in African proverbs. From these sources, proverbs referencing violence against women were extracted for analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed as the analytical framework. According to Phillips and Jørgensen (2006: 61-65), the core principles of CDA are that "discursive practices contribute to the construction of social identities and relations; discourse both constitutes and is shaped by social practices; and language should be analysed within its social context, as discursive practices create and reinforce unequal power relations." Proverbs subtly but powerfully sustain gendered social hierarchies that disadvantage women. CDA helps reveal how proverbs contribute to the continued subjugation of women in Africa and provides insights for promoting positive social change, as discourse is both a reflection of and a tool for shaping society (Wetherell, 2001; Richardson, 2007).

This study also adopts Lazar's (2005) approach to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which critiques discourses that reinforce patriarchal power structures—systems that privilege men while disempowering women. FCDA is particularly relevant for examining hegemonic masculinity and femininity, which underpin gender inequality in patriarchal societies. Connell (1987, 1995) explains that such systems normalise male authority and female subordination, presenting male dominance as natural or inherent. Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as a set of gendered practices that legitimise patriarchy by securing male dominance and female subjugation. FCDA is well-suited to this study as it exposes the ways in which taken-for-granted gender norms and hegemonic power relations are produced, reinforced, and sometimes challenged through discourse (Lazar, 2007: 142). By applying this framework, this study critically examines how African proverbs can perpetuate GBV and gender inequality.

Data Presentation

It can be reasonably asserted that, in Africa, proverbs serve predominantly as **linguistic instruments of patriarchy**, given their empirically demonstrated tendency to **diminish the status of women while glorifying men**. African oral literature is abundant with **subtly nuanced expressions** that reinforce **imbalanced power dynamics** between genders, systematically **marginalising women while elevating men** to positions of **dominance and significance**. The following proverbs, drawn from various African societies, exemplify how language can **perpetuate and legitimise violence** against women.

1. Pashan ta fi na yale, oun be laja fun 'yawo

The whip that was used to beat the first wife is kept for the second wife (Yoruba; Balogun, 2010)

This proverb implies that a woman is regarded as a child who must be disciplined whenever she errs and that a man has the right to physically chastise his wife (or wives). It also presupposes a man's right to marry multiple wives, reducing women to mere possessions. Additionally, it warns the second wife not to expect preferential treatment over the first. Similar proverbs can be found in the **Frafra Traditional Area of Ghana (2)** and among the **Igbo (3)**:

2. Doseka n gme pogi keema la, n gme'ere pogsariga.

The stick that is used to beat the first wife will be the same stick that will be used on the second wife. (Frafra; Baataar et al., 2023)

3. Nwaanyi na-dighi anuru di ya okwu, itali ka e ji ezi ya ihe.

A woman that is disobedient to her husband must be taught obedience with the cane. (Igbo; Agbedo, Obiora & Ahamefula, 2016)

This Igbo proverb is frequently used in Igbo society. It is sexist as it is predominantly used by men to **diminish the worth and dignity of women**. It reflects a **chauvinistic ideology**, reinforcing male superiority and endorsing violence as a means of coercion. Hussein (2005:66) cites another Igbo narrative proverb:

4. An Ugwuta (Oguta) girl told her mother that as she was going on her way, a man came and threw her down and sexed (raped) her. Her mother told her to go and retaliate. She went, and was sexed (raped) again.

According to Hussein, this proverb highlights the **sexual vulnerability** of women and underscores the **normalisation of sexual violence in patriarchal societies**. It reflects men's **collective and individual assumption of dominance**, reinforcing gender-based oppression (Disch, 1997:564-565). Furthermore, it signifies how **African men are socialised into dominant roles** (Tlou, 2002), fostering a culture of **subjugation and degradation** that strips women of **dignity, autonomy, and human rights**.

5. hinakuhilayikambunjimatakakahacyineyitalakuo wumuvumbuwuchinana

What annoys the red mongoose most are insults, but you still insult it mentioning how red his lips are.
(Lunda; Mutunda, 2016)

This proverb mocks a wife who has been physically assaulted by her husband. The underlying assumption is that a man has the **right to beat his wife**, likening her to a child who must be corrected when she misbehaves. It normalises **domestic violence** as an acceptable means of **coercion and control**. A similar proverb, *chanunantunū* (“A roof remover”), suggests that a **woman provokes her husband's aggression**, thereby justifying **physical abuse**. The following West African proverb furthers this narrative:

6. Beat your wife regularly; if you don't know why, she will.

The proverb in (6) encourages **systematic domestic abuse** and **reinforces gender-based violence**.

7. If you really love your wife, you have to beat her.
(Tarika, Ethiopia; Kiiru, 1999)

This proverb upholds the notion that **mental and physical abuse** is a natural part of marriage. It suggests that **violence serves as a means of asserting male dominance**, portraying marriage as a **rehabilitation institution** where women must be trained into obedience (Ncube & Moyo, 2014:132). Such perspectives are **particularly troubling**, considering they persist even within **matrilineal societies**, where women might otherwise be expected to hold more social power.

8. Eyaapa Nabulobe, eliipa Nabukelema.

That which was used to beat the rejected one (wife) will be used to beat the loved one. (Bukusu)

This proverb, similar to those in (1), (2), and (3), appears to caution against complacency and arrogance. However, it subtly alludes to women, reinforcing the idea that all wives, regardless of their status, will ultimately experience domestic abuse.

9. Okhayiya khubalebe nga namulekhwa tawe.

Do not wander about among the relatives like a widow (Bukusu)

This proverb singles out widowed women for **contemptuous commentary**, reducing them to figures of **ridicule and isolation**. According to Barasa and Opande (2017), proverbs like the one above highlight the prevalence of **polygamy and domestic violence**

among the Bukusu, where men beat their wives, force them out of their homes, and take new wives—who, in turn, suffer similar abuse. Research indicates that **45% of women** have experienced **physical violence** (KDHS, 2014, cited in Barasa & Opande, 2017).

10. Beat your wife regularly; if you don't know why, she will know why

(West Africa; Schipper, 2006)

11. If you really love your wife you have to beat her

(Tigrinya, Eritrea; Schipper, 2006)

12. Now the marriage is going to begin, as the neglected wife said, when she was flogged with thorns.

(Hausa; Schipper, 2006)

Proverbs, such as those in (10) (11) and (12) **normalise and encourage domestic violence**, treating it as an essential component of marriage. Across diverse cultures, these expressions reinforce the **universality of men's perceptions regarding the acceptability of violence against women**. These proverbs illustrate the **lack of regard for women's suffering**, reinforcing the notion that **physical punishment strengthens emotional bonds**. However, in reality, **domestic violence fosters resentment, hatred, and trauma**, undermining healthy relationships (Tatar, 2022:44).

Additionally, Assefa (2016) identifies numerous **misogynistic Amharic proverbs** that **dehumanise and oppress women**, making **domestic abuse appear acceptable**. By **normalising such behaviour**, society prevents individuals—including women—from recognising it as **criminal or abusive**. The data presented here underscore the **pervasiveness of domestic violence** and its **deep-seated cultural legitimisation through language**.

(13)

a. ሴትና አህያ የማችሉት የለማ

setanna ahayya yamayfəlut yällämm

‘A woman and a donkey can tolerate everything’

b. የደንጋይን ጦርነት፣ የሸሮን ቀለብነት፣ የሚስትን ባርነት

yädəngayən t'orənnät yäfəron k'alläbənnät yämistən barənnät

‘Conflict using stone is analogous to supplies of mush and slavery of a wife’

c. አህያና ሴት ቢረግጥዋት አይከፋት

ahəyyanna set birəgət'wat aykäfat

‘A woman and a donkey do not refuse being trampled’

d. እናት ትረገጣለች እንደመሬት

ənnat tərreggät'allätif'əndämäret

‘A mother is trampled like the earth’

e. ሴትና አህያ በዳላ

setənnā ahəyya bādulla

‘A woman and a donkey are controlled by a stick’

f. ከሸንጎ ቢረታ ከቤት ሚስቱን መታ

käfängo birräta käbet mistun mäta

‘When a man was beaten in a forum, he went home and beat his wife’

g. ማንን ታሸንፋለህ ቢሉት ሚስቴን አለ

mannəntaffännəfalläh bilut misten alä

‘When a man is asked over whom he enjoys victory, he said, “my wife”’

h. አማቱን ምታ ቢባል ሚስቴን በየት አልፎ አለ

amatun mətā bilut misten bāyät alləfe alä

‘When a man is ordered to hit his mother-in-law, he said “how can I

skip over my wife”’

i. የምታሸንፈውን ምታ ቢባል ወደሚስቱ ሮጠ

yämmətaffännəfäwən mətā bilut wädemistu rot'ä

‘When a man is ordered to hit the person over whom he has won, he runs to his wife’

Assefa (2016) argues that women are vulnerable to domestic abuse within the sociocultural context under study and, presumably, in many other cultures as well. In addition to performing arduous physical labour, they endure beatings from their husbands during domestic disputes. However, neither women nor society at large perceive this as abuse or criminal behaviour, as it has been normalised and ingrained through socialisation. Proverbs (13a) and (13b) reflect how women are regarded as mere servants, despite the immense burdens they bear in supporting their families. Instead of being acknowledged for their contributions, they are dismissed as undeserving complainers. Even more degradingly, they are

compared to mush—one of the most common and frequently mistreated food items in society—further reinforcing their status as subjugated individuals.

Proverb (13c) suggests that women not only accept but also enjoy being beaten, particularly by their husbands. This mindset fosters the belief that physical punishment is the only way to correct perceived misbehaviour in women. The comparison of women to the ground—constantly trodden upon—further implies that they are deserving of violence. Even more disturbingly, women are likened to donkeys, an animal widely regarded as unintelligent and expected to endure mistreatment without complaint.

According to Assefa, proverb (13f) suggests that men project their frustrations and failures in public life onto their wives through physical violence, using them as emotional scapegoats. Within this societal framework, women—especially wives—are perceived as inferior to men and are thus subjected to domestic abuse as a means of control. Husbands, in particular, assume an inherent right to beat their wives, to the extent that, when seeking an outlet for their aggression, they instinctively turn to their spouses. Proverbs (13f)–(13i) exemplify this socially constructed reality, directly contradicting the core principles of marriage, which advocate unity and mutual respect.

Furthermore, Assefa (2016) contends that the Amharic proverbs in (13a)–(13i) illustrate how the target speech community has historically reinforced a reality in which women are expected to be victims of domestic violence. Wives, in particular, endure multiple forms of abuse, with physical beatings being the most severe. This reality is embedded in both the society’s proverbs and its broader oral traditions, which perpetuate and legitimise violence against women in domestic settings. These proverbs not only reflect but also actively encourage the continuation of such violence, serving as clear examples of how sexist language devalues women.

Hussein (2005) argues that proverbs reinforcing masculine dominance—such as “*The husband returned home and whipped his wife when he was allowed to whip whomever he could*”—can lead some men to develop a distorted sense of masculinity, equating manhood with the control and subjugation of women through physical and psychological violence.

As previously noted, linguistically induced violence against women is not exclusive to Africa. Many cultures and societies possess proverbs that endorse violence against women. Fernández (2022), in his

study on the persistence of sexism in Martínez Kleiser's *Refranero General Ideológico Español*, highlights the following examples:

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- a. To a woman and a dog, a stick in one hand and bread in the other.
- b. To a woman and a candle, twist their neck if you want them to be good.
- c. The woman and the pavement always want to be trodden on.
- d. The ass and the woman must be beaten with sticks.

Fernández (2022) argues that, even when uttered in jest, such expressions—laden with derogatory and violent connotations—perpetuate a culture of domestic abuse. These proverbs do not merely reflect violence against women; they actively promote and legitimise it. Moreover, the recurring comparisons between women and objects or animals, particularly beasts of burden, are neither coincidental nor insignificant. Many proverbs that justify violence against women attempt to rationalise such actions by equating women with animals that must be controlled through force.

Tartar (2022), referencing Schipper (2006), presents a collection of cross-cultural proverbs that advocate for the beating of women as a means of securing their obedience:

15. The man who cannot slaughter his sheep or beat his wife [when she deserves it], it is better for him to die than to live (An Arabic proverb from the Maghreb).
16. To keep your wife on the rails, beat her – and if she goes off the rails, beat her (Spanish, Puerto Rico).
17. Women, like gongs, should be beaten regularly (English, USA).
18. A bad woman and a good woman both need the rod (Spanish, Argentina).
19. Good horses and bad horses need the spurs, good women and bad women need the whip (Many variants in both Europe and the Americas).
20. Do not spare a bullock or a wife (Burmese).
21. Caulk a new boat; beat a new wife (Khionghta).
22. Clubbing produces virtuous wives (Chinese).

23. A woman who is beaten is going to be a better wife (Korean).

24. The nails of a cart and the head of a woman, they only work when they are hit hard (Rajasthani).

25. For who beats up his wife, God improves the food (Russian).

26. A nut, a stockfish, and a young wife should be beaten, in order to be good (Polish).

27. A woman, a dog and a walnut tree, the harder you beat them, the better they be (English, UK/USA).

28. Women, like dogs: the more you beat them, the more they love you (Spanish, Argentina).

29. Women and steaks, the more you beat them, the better they'll be (German).

30. Wring a wife's and a hen's neck, if you want them good (Europe and both Americas).

31. If you don't thrash your wife, she might think she's already a widow (Armenian).

These proverbs, originating from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, reinforce the deeply ingrained notion that physical violence is an acceptable and even necessary tool for controlling women. For instance, the Arabic proverb from the Maghreb (15) equates a man's ability to beat his wife with his worthiness to live, while the Puerto Rican proverb (16) prescribes beating as a routine measure to ensure a wife's compliance. Similarly, the American-English proverb (17) likens women to gongs that require regular striking, and the Spanish-Argentinian proverb (18) asserts that both good and bad women need to be subjected to physical punishment.

This pattern of thought is not limited to any single region; rather, it persists across continents, from Burmese (20) and Chinese (22) proverbs to Rajasthani (24) and Russian (25) expressions, all of which normalise and legitimise violence against women. The recurrence of comparisons between women and animals, objects, or food—such as horses (19), stockfish and walnuts (26), dogs (28), and steaks (29)—further illustrates the dehumanisation embedded within these cultural narratives. The Polish (26) and English (27) proverbs go so far as to claim that the harder women are beaten, the better they become, reinforcing a dangerous ideology that equates submission with virtue. Even more explicitly, the Armenian proverb (31) warns that without routine violence, a wife may begin to see herself as

independent, further highlighting the patriarchal anxiety surrounding female autonomy.

These proverbs, despite their varied origins, reflect a disturbing global continuity in the justification of gender-based violence. The normalisation of physical abuse through such sayings perpetuates misogynistic attitudes and reinforces the structural oppression of women. While some may argue that these expressions are relics of the past, their continued presence in oral traditions and literary compilations suggests that the underlying beliefs they promote still resonate in many societies. Recognising and challenging these proverbs is crucial in dismantling the cultural narratives that sustain violence against women and in fostering a more just and equitable world.

Discussion of Findings

The purported purpose of proverbs is to provide guidance and wisdom in both private and public affairs through the social norms and beliefs they convey. However, an examination of selected African proverbs reveals that this objective is not always fulfilled. While some proverbs do offer wisdom and guidance for life, others are laden with gender discrimination and stereotypes. These serve as both a moral burden and a societal blemish that calls into question the belief in true humanity. Throughout history, women have been subjected to victimisation and violence, facilitated by the reverential canonisation of oral literature and proverbs that promote excessive male dominance and female subjugation. Within this framework, men develop a sense of entitlement to superior treatment and opportunities, while women are conditioned to accept an inferior status, often being likened to animals. Such comparisons dehumanise women, thereby justifying their mistreatment and the violence directed at them in order to maintain the distorted social equilibrium created by patriarchy. Africa is not an exception to the global oppression of women. Gender equality remains elusive, even in regions of the world where racial and gender disparities in education and other social achievements are believed to have been largely eradicated (Hussein, 2005).

The examples cited, drawn from diverse ethnic groups, illustrate how proverbs are utilised in African social and cultural organisation to reinforce entrenched patriarchal structures. They depict the oppression and subjugation of women across many African nations. Proverbs are integral to African epistemology, as they play a crucial role in shaping knowledge for the advancement of human existence. Their connection to significant existential issues and their perceived

immutability over time lend them credibility in supporting historical claims (Etta & Mogu, 2012). If proverbs are indeed regarded as an unalterable set of social rules, then it follows that a skewed and disparaging representation of African women is being consistently reinforced across the continent. These deeply embedded cultural notions influence major life decisions based on the principles believed to be encapsulated within proverbs. Ultimately, proverbs function as an open gallery of African knowledge, facilitating control and the imposition of a particular worldview as sacred and universally accepted. Consequently, proverbs often serve to uphold patriarchy across generations by presenting male dominance as an unchanging, stable component of the social order (Kamwendo & Kaya, 2016).

Goheen (1996) argues that proverbs can function as vehicles for disseminating powerful ideologies, sustaining the dominance of certain groups by favouring ideas and traditions that discriminate against individuals based on gender, age, race, social class, ability, and other attributes. Similarly, Gyan (2018) asserts that attitudes, judgements, and perceptions of women—both positive and negative—are internalised and learned through a combination of direct instruction, behavioural patterns, songs, proverbs, wise sayings, and folktales. These internalised views subsequently shape behaviour.

In accordance with von Bülow's (1992) analysis, Hussein (2005) advocates for the continuous redefinition and reinterpretation of gender stereotypes to liberate both men and women from restrictive gender roles. If proverbs are to retain their significance as concise and universal distillations of common wisdom, they must be reconstructed to discourage all forms of violence against women. A significant number of scholars (Raji-Oyelade, 1999; Balogun, 2010; Adegbola, 2021) have championed the revision of oppressive proverbs, resisting them through education and the persistent pursuit of the feminist agenda. This process involves reinterpreting certain African proverbs that are considered obsolete. In a similar initiative, a South African women's shelter in 2021 called for the reconstruction of African proverbs to reshape public perceptions of gender-based violence. The shelter collaborated with various organisations to employ a public relations, influencer, and billboard campaign aimed at actively revising traditional proverbs about women, thereby shifting the discourse towards equality and respect. This approach effectively disempowers outdated, harmful proverbs and fosters new perspectives grounded in justice and fairness. By altering societal perceptions of women's

worth, it is possible to address deeply embedded beliefs that perpetuate gender-based violence. A conscious effort to reconstruct discriminatory proverbs is believed to positively influence men's attitudes towards women and gender-based violence. If canonical texts steeped in misogyny have negatively shaped men's perceptions of women, turning women's history into one of suffering and oppression (Chollet, 2020; Holland, 2006), then a concerted effort by governments, non-governmental organisations, and the academic community to raise awareness and promote gender equality is essential in addressing violence against women. This effort should engage both men and women, particularly young people, in fostering healthy gender relations. To drive societal progress, young men must be encouraged to cultivate positive attitudes and dispositions towards their female counterparts.

Ultimately, we all have a personal responsibility to critically examine the body of popular knowledge that has accumulated into canonical expressions. According to Kerschen (2000:68), "We risk fostering animosity, miscommunication, and prejudice if we do not carefully analyse what we have been taught by proverbs to determine what we truly believe and discard the rest in our personal use." Similarly, Nisrane and Tizazu (2019:342) assert that "Efforts should be made to educate society about the damaging expressions while maintaining and supplementing the positive practice." A fundamental aspect of this process is the rejection of harmful ideas, even when they are conveyed in jest (Martínez Garrido, 2001:95). Additionally, strategies for subverting negative gender ideologies through creative appropriation or the production of new, positive discourses should be employed (Lomotey, 2019:336), and the prejudices inherent in sexist proverbs must be recognised as "blatant lies" (Presbey, 1999:178). The emergence of female paremiographers is seen as a development that could help mitigate the detrimental effects of proverbs on society.

The United Nations estimates that approximately 736 million women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both, at least once in their lifetime. This equates to about one in three women globally. Violence against women and girls remains one of the most widespread and egregious human rights violations. The root cause and the solution to this issue are not difficult to identify. Generations of individuals in Africa and beyond have been indoctrinated into a culture of hegemonic patriarchy, which provides fertile ground for misogynistic views and sexist

ideologies. The solution lies in the commitment of African nations and societies to dismantle patriarchal structures by embracing gender equality and implementing comprehensive educational reforms to counteract the damaging impact of harmful proverbs. To eradicate gender-based violence, governments, NGOs, and the academic community must take concerted action. Governments must lead the way by instituting legal repercussions for gender-based violence and enshrining them in national constitutions. Despite the need for robust responses, including investment in preventative measures, data on national expenditure towards combating violence against women and girls remains alarmingly scarce. Academics should engage in rigorous analysis to align cultural and linguistic properties with contemporary values, while NGOs should conduct extensive awareness campaigns to challenge and correct harmful cultural norms. Lastly, positive cultural elements should be harnessed to reform societal attitudes. By promoting progressive proverbs, songs, and dramatic performances, societies can effectively challenge and transform the narratives that sustain violence against women. Igbolekwu et al. (2021) advocate for the creation of indigenous songs, playlets, and proverbs that highlight the adverse effects of domestic violence, with local radio and television broadcasts disseminating this knowledge to raise public awareness.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the deeply entrenched patriarchal ideologies within African societies as reflected in proverbs that perpetuate violence against women. Through an anthropologico-linguistic analysis of selected African proverbs, this study demonstrates how language serves as a medium for sustaining gender inequalities and reinforcing male dominance in both private and public spheres. While proverbs are a cherished aspect of African cultural heritage, their content must evolve to reflect contemporary values that uphold the dignity, rights, and agency of women in society.

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