

Gender Stereotypes in Popular Linguistic Resources: Examples from Sudan and Malawi

Fatma Osman Ibnouf (PhD)

Assistant professor
Development Studies and Research Institute (DSRI)
University of Khartoum
Sudan.

Chikondi L. Manyungwa-Pasani

Chief Fisheries Officer (M&E)
Department of Fisheries
Lilongwe
Malawi

Abstract

The indigenous literary tradition, such as proverbs, expresses in the everyday phrases contributes to gender stereotypes. Popular linguistic resources are dominated by negative stereotypes of women that work to perpetuate women's inferior status in the social hierarchy in Sudan and Malawi, as well in many worldwide societies. In Malawi and Sudan women have continued to struggle against stereotypes and the patriarchal mentalities of their communities. The influence of popular proverbs on people thought is still so strong and these popular proverbs serve as a mirror which reflects the culture and the beliefs of a society. So far systematic study on how proverbs contribute to gender stereotypes employing a sound methodology is lacking. This study argues that women are victims of the culturally accepted traditions such as popular proverbs which affect mechanisms that perpetuate women's undervaluing in managing and controlling power levers. The study demonstrates that popular proverbs sustain the traditional role of the women and the persistence of socially prescribed gender roles and stereotypes are deep-rooted in Sudanese and Malawian culture. Most abuses of women's rights and violence against women have been the result of culture rather than deliberate. People are still using proverbs as excuses to discriminate against women. Thus, women's status is not determined or governed by the contribution they make to their family or society, but by culturally accepted traditions and strongly held beliefs such as popular proverbs, which have several myths attached with them. Yet women themselves play significant role as custodians of culture.

Keywords: Proverbs, Gender Stereotyping, Violence against Women, Sudan and Malawi

Introduction

The indigenous literary tradition is oral rather than written and includes a variety of popular linguistic resources that include popular stories, songs, poems, and proverbs. Such tradition expresses in the everyday phrases contributes to gender stereotypes, especially negative attitudes towards women. Tradition linguistic remains an active force since it is built into the foundations of social culture, from the perspective of linguistic anthropology. However, culture is not static but malleable (Caprioni and Sajoo, 2011).

There are more cross-cultural similarities in the world's traditional gender legacies than differences, to name just a few the gender-based disadvantages, gendered division of work, unequal access to economic opportunities, like the gendered access to productive resources or to basic services like education and health. There are social stereotypes which associate masculinity with having authority over others and social stereotypes about what is "man's work" and "women's work"; such stereotypes are not matters of individual preference, but are inscribed in social institutions (Elson, 1999, p. 611). In order to understand gender inequality discourse, women inferior status, domestic violence, and negative attitudes against women, it is important to examine the socio-cultural context, the ways in which cultures construct popular linguistic traditions about gender and women. Embedded norms and stereotypes shape everyday behaviors and decision-making, ranging from choices about whether to lay off a woman or a man during economic downturns; to educate daughters or sons when money is scarce; or to promote a man or a woman into a managerial position (Seguino, 2011).

Culture has been classified into its material and non-material aspects, while material culture refers to the visible tactile objects; non-material culture comprises of the norms and mores of the people (Idang, 2015). Non-material culture is abstract but has a very pervasive influence on the lives of the people of a particular culture (ibid). Proverbs are all good examples of non-material culture. It is true that Africa is inhabited by various ethnic nationalities with their different languages, eating, but in spite of their various cultures, Africans do share some dominant traits in their belief systems and have similar values that mark them out from other peoples of the world (Idang, 2015). African proverbs and wise sayings have a rich repository of wisdom. The proverbs warn the African against evil conduct and, are "therefore a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of African heritage" (Mbiti, 1977: 8 cited in Idang, 2015).

Concept of Proverb

Proverbs are familiar, fixed, sentential expressions that express well-known truths, social norms, or moral concerns (Gibbs and Beitel, 1995). Proverbs are considered as expressions that reveal the life-world and values of the people of a given society as well as their attitudes towards their surroundings (Ahamed, 2005). The popular culture of the people throughout history is reflected in their linguistic resources such as literature, sayings and proverbs. Such tradition expressions are a necessary mission that is essential for the maintenance of the life of a culture of a given society. African states "Proverbs are the daughters of experience". Ssetuba (2002) asserts that the proverb is highly regarded as a noble genre of African oral tradition that enjoys the prestige of a custodian of a people's wisdom and philosophy of life. The great Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (author of *Arrow of God* 1964) once wrote that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. In proverbs one finds peoples' ideas about life, the ideals and values they hold valued and the elements they consider supreme in the spiritual as well as material life (Abdalla, et al. 1998). The proverb, with its different time and place changes, is no more than a cultural product related to a certain historical situation with its own conditions and determining factors (Belafia, 2008). Hussein (2009) argues that in asymmetrically structured societies, linguistic resources are systematically used to perpetuate gender inequality. Proverbs for being concise, having explicit message, being instructive and affecting addressee have been applied since long among different generations (Rezaei, 2012, p. 1107). Proverbs are still frequently used in the daily communication and also in writing.

Proverbs reflect social and cultural norms with regard to gender roles; it is also interesting to explore how gender roles have evolved over time. Most behaviors are usually learnt through imitation and reinforcement. Worldwide children are socialized taught through proverbs, stories, and songs from the beginning (childhood) socially accepted gender roles and they internalize them. Children grow up to view the world from their society's (parents') specific gender standpoints. From a very young age girls and boys are encouraged to follow different paths; be it via the songs or the stories that are told to them. Anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists have suggested that manhood is widely viewed as something a boy must earn and struggle to maintain and such cultures can be found in many parts of the world (Vandello and Cohen, 2008, p. 653). The socialization has molded boys and girls (masculine and feminine) to behave that way in order to suit the expectations of the society they grow up in. It is culture and socialization that have constructed man as superior sex and women as inferior sex. It is an implicit rule that has solidified over the ages. Nashwan (2000, p. 127) believes that proverbs are important weapons in men's hands within a particular society.

Gender Stereotyping in Proverbs

Gender stereotyping in languages has long been of interest within anthropologists, sociologists, sociolinguistics, social-psychologists and related disciplines. Social psychologists have explored the extent to which proverbial sayings reflect normative aspects of how people think and behave in social situations (Gibbs and Beitel, 1995, p. 133). According to Hilton and Van-Hippel (1996) stereotypes describe the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of a certain group (cited in Wu and Kurylo, 2010, p. 69). For Miller, et al. (2006, p. 300) stereotypes are processed and activated within a situational context. Gender stereotype is a matter of individual beliefs and actions about the inferiority of women and the superiority of men in a given culture. Gender stereotypes are sets of beliefs about attributes of men and women (Romaine, 2005). Stereotypes are essentially sets of beliefs which shape the way we think and behave in everyday life (Hall, 2012). They affect the way we see ourselves and the way in which we see and understand others (ibid). Gender stereotyping is overgeneralization of male or female behaviors that may or may not be accurate and may produce negative consequence in everyday interaction (Wu and Kurylo, 2010, p. 69). Gender stereotype can be developed under the influence of social conditions and backgrounds.

There are many reasons leading to the social construction of culture and gender stereotypes in many patriarchal societies. Patriarchy is a male word linguistically. Patriarchy has prevailed in much of the world that men are superior to women assigns to them unequal value. Note patriarchy has been defined as a gendered power system: a network of social, political and economic relationships through which men dominates and control female labor and reproduction as well as defines women's status, privileges and rights in a society (Kalabamu, 2006, p. 237). In the patriarchal societies, popular proverbs, poems, song, and stories as a whole play a role in establishing and preserving traditions, have considerable contribution in maintaining patriarchal systems, which make them deeply-rooted structures that are difficult to change. Hussein (2009) points out that gender ideology contains legends, narratives and myths about what it means to be a man or a woman and suggests how each should behave in the society. Proverbs in everyday informal and normalized ordinary talk facilitates the discriminatory behavior towards women. This is thus, an implicit encouragement of the current structure of the gender dichotomy. Psychologists and sociologists have proved that social forces rather than anatomy shape gender yet girls grow up considering domestic responsibilities to be their primary goal (Ramaswamy, 2005). Sudanese and Malawian women live in these societies which are dominated by patriarchy.

Many languages have proverbs and sayings that indicate gender hierarchies in which men are more highly valued than women, and women are stereotyped as stupid (Romaine, 2005). Many women in Sudan and Malawi silently have come to believe that these popular proverbs are gems of wisdom and are true. Thus the influence of popular proverbs is enveloping. Nonetheless, women play a role in preserving traditions which include many negative stereotypes about them and passing them on accurately from one generation to the next. Such stereotypes reflect and shape culture and thus, they have remained constant over the years. They have internalized these ideas, so for women in such situation the difference between stereotypes and reality becomes problematic.

These points generate some important questions, which need to be answered:

- What roles do popular proverbs play in construction of gender stereotypes and roles within Sudanese and Malawian societies?
- How do people use their popular proverbs, traditional stories, and songs to bring up their children, and why?
- Do women play a role in perpetuating the negative stereotypes on themselves contained in these popular proverbs?
- What are people's current attitudes towards popular proverbs in their societies?
- What are the similarities and differences between proverbs that shape women status in Sudanese and Malawian societies?
- What are the efforts undertaken so far to deal with gender stereotypes in popular proverbs that shape women status?

Significance of the Study

Every society has culturally accepted traditions context that shape the lives of both sexes by placing men and women in particular social positions and expectations patterns.

For such societies in order to change mindsets and to achieve gender equality and to make women undertake a larger role in their society and in development in large, the deeper structural gender stereotypes must be addressed.

Proverbs 'regarded as wisdoms' and serve as the basis for formulating concepts that structure gender stereotypes and govern gender relations. The first step towards this is broken down systematically the inherent gender stereotypes created within traditional cultural expressions, proverbs. This would require assessing the gender stereotypes surrounding their existence and are often used by people in conscious or unconscious ways, if willing to bring attitudinal changes for peaceful and equity society. Thus, to be tackled effectively they have to be understood in their appropriate context.

In spite of considerable research on gender stereotypes, not much has been focused on how the popular indigenous heritages and culturally accepted traditions such as, proverbs, traditional stories, songs, metaphors etc degrading and insulting women in many societies, particularly in Sudan and Malawi. There is a need to fill these gaps in research.

This study also seeks to generate information that could be used by women's institutions, advocates, researchers, nongovernmental organizations and many others concerned with tackling traditional gender stereotypes, improving women role in society, and achieving gender equality.

More broadly, the study seeks to make a contribution to the international literature in advancing our understanding of the challenges to achieving gender equality in traditional societies.

Most abuses of women's rights and violence against women have been the result of culture rather than a deliberate. People are still using proverbs, cultural product, as excuses to beat women and treat her unequally with her male counterparts. Yet understanding cultural diversity remains one of the true challenges of gender stereotypes.

Study Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine inherent gender stereotypes created within popular indigenous heritages and culturally accepted traditions – inherent popular proverbs – that degrade and insult women in Sudanese and Malawian societies.

The specific objectives of this research include:

- To bring to light the under-researched gendered stereotypes framed in some popular sexist proverbs in Sudanese and Malawian societies.
- To identify how proverbs, create, maintain, and reinforce gender stereotypes
- To explore the similarity and differences between tradition proverbs construct women position in Sudanese and Malawian societies and perpetuate gender inequality.
- To suggest some recommendations to enhance women's role in society and tackle negative gender stereotypes.
- To derive from the results of the study some suggestions for further research.

Sudan Cultural Background

Sudan does not have a 'national culture'; however, it is multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious and pluralistic nation. In recognition of this diversity and patriarchal nature of Sudanese societies, women are the main victims of the oppression elements of these cultures. Among the various ethnic groups in Sudan, proverbs are popular beliefs and are a major component in everyday communication and expression. The proverbs reflect the possession of cultural wisdom and usually the proverbial materials taken as a matter of fact in a social and cultural context.

Sudan is truly a multi-cultural nation with many ethnic groups. The country is composed of nineteen major ethnic groups and about six hundred sub-groups each have their own customs and traditions and cultural diversity. The differences in culture, whether based on geographical, religion, or ethnic origin, are suggested to accompany differences in attitudes toward women. In many societies in Sudan, gender roles and norms marginalize women socially and economically, condone violence in the family, permit discrimination against girls and women in various spheres and, therefore, create an environment where violence disproportionately affects women.

The inability to create a solid base for women's rights is due to a lack of formal and societal belief in these rights and a lack of goodwill and commitment to enforce them. It is still a common, deeply rooted conviction, even among some women, that women are not able to hold equal roles, shoulder similar responsibilities, and enjoy the same rights as men in public and private life. This belief is partly attributed to the limited understanding of religion, the erroneous application of certain rules, and the failure to develop a new understanding and interpretation of *Shari'a* principles that is able to accommodate current needs, including those of women. The outdated customs and traditions, which propagate women's inferiority, play a significant role in this context. Religion and some cultural beliefs and practices still generate male supremacy and dominance at home and outside it, turning equality and non-discrimination clauses into mere lip service. This structural dynamic is taught and presented as 'reality', generation after generation. This cycle can only be broken when we uncover what gender really is; a social construction.

Malawi Cultural Background

The Malawian population is composed of more than 20 ethnic groups that migrated into the country between the 15th and 19th century. The major ethnic groups are the Tumbuka, the Ngoni and the Tonga in the North, the Chewa and the Ngoni in the Centre and the Yao, the Lomwe, the Sena and the Mang'anja in the Southern Region (Pachai, 1973). Having a variety of ethnic groupings, Malawi has diverse cultural practices and beliefs which guide its members on how they should live or behave. Despite the diversity in cultural practices and beliefs, these ethnic groups come under one major ethnic grouping called the Bantu which is one of the largest ethnic groupings in Southern Africa; as such these ethnic groups have some commonalities in their cultural practices and beliefs (MHRC Report, 2005). Culture defines the spaces within which power is expressed, where gender relations are negotiated and gender roles re-defined (SAFAIDS, 2008).

Malawi has two lineage patterns, patrilineal and matrilineal. Under patrilineal, descent is through males, and residence is patrilocal. The wife leaves her village and resides at her husband's village. Whereas in matrilineal, descent follows the female lineage (WLSA Malawi, 2002). In both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, the position that women assume is inferior to the male members within the systems as decisions are mostly made by the men with women on the receiving end. It has also been argued (WLSA Malawi, 2002 *supra*) that in terms of social security, the patrilineal system may provide such security to women and children as men feel they have an obligation to take care of their families. Contrary to popular belief, in the matrilineal system, due to the matrilineal residence, men do not feel obliged to make any investments as they feel that they will not live in that village forever. Furthermore, they do not feel they have an obligation to take care of their children since tradition dictates that the maternal uncle is the one that is supposed to assume that responsibility. The patriarchal social structure has been at the base of existing gender imbalances in the country. This, therefore, puts women at a disadvantage, and they are usually overburdened to care for their families single-handedly after divorce or the death of husbands (WLSA Malawi, 2002 cited in WIDSAA/SARDC *Supra*).

Methodology

To pursue the objectives of this study, field survey has been conducted to provide the primary data. The methods used during the field survey were focus groups interviews and key informants techniques to get information about the principal themes of this study. Field survey was conducted in Khartoum in Sudan and Lilongwe in Malawi.

The methodology of this study also involved review of existing relevant literature to provide a comprehensive overview of the similarities and differences between proverbs that shape women status in the two study countries, as well in Africa, and worldwide.

Data were analyzed using simple thematic analysis. Qualitative information generated during the interviews of key informants was carefully read as the whole material and then summarized and presented as results.

Research Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the proverbs have still great influence in Sudan and Malawi. People continue to believe that 'proverbs are wise sayings and lamp of speech'. In Sudan during a study of 'the people viewpoints on women's empowerment concept' the researcher (Ibnouf) discovered something totally unexpected that the impact of proverbs still influence peoples' perceptions and thoughts about women's empowerment. The sample surveyed asked about their perceptions and thoughts about women's empowerment.

Amazingly most of the sample continues to have stereotypical images of what male and female behaviour ought to be like, the traits that are masculine or feminine. In Sudan and Malawi, the surveyed sample asked about their opinion on some of well-known and culturally accepted proverbs that degrades and insults women. Almost the entire sample believed that these popular proverbs are gems of wisdom and complete truths. The Sudanese surveyed sample convinced that "Even if the woman were an axe she would not break the head", and "Consult women and act contrary to their advice". In Malawi the surveyed sample indicated 'mwamunampamimba', which literally means 'women should ensure they provide their husbands enough food prior to children and themselves'. It seems people are no longer in control of the subconscious mind about cultural beliefs. In Sudan and Malawi, the existence of proverbs messages is still strongly prevalent today, consciously or subconsciously. This is a reinforced gender stereotyping beliefs since gender stereotype is a social construct. These mindsets strongly influence people view of gender relationship and role that lead to prevalence of gender stereotyping, reflect society's biases and highlight some of the gender stereotypical ways men and women still treat each other. Cultures have gender specific proverbs which are used in perpetuating and legitimizing patriarchal values and principles.

Table (1) Proverbs keep women in subordinate positions – Sudan

Sudanese Popular proverbs	Literally Means	Implications to women subordination
المرأة كانت بقت فأس ما بتكسر الرأس Al-mara inn bigat fass ma bitaksir ar-ras	Even if the woman was an axe she would not break the head	This proverb states that however great the importance of a woman, she remains powerless.
المرأة مكسورة جناح Al-mara maksurat janah'	Woman has broken wings	This proverb represents women as being as weak as birds that cannot fly. Some Sudanese believe that women are weak and helpless. Thus, they should be protected by men all their lives
النسوان شاورهن وخالفهن Al-neswan shorhen wa khalfhen	Consult women and act contrary to their advice	This proverb states that women's advice is worth nothing. Ask woman for advice and act completely against her advice, as women's opinion is considered to be wrong. The man is the mainly decision-maker of the household.
ظل رجل ولا ظل حيطه Dell ragel wala dell heitah	Shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall	This proverb says it's better to get married whoever. As the "shadow" of a man, not the man himself, it is about how necessary for women to have man around. Whoever a man is, he is the woman's guardian
كان قرت قانون للكانون		Even if a woman is an educated woman, there should be no difference in their role either of leading the family or deciding to take charge of their own lives without the aid of their menfolk.
المرأة ما بدوها رسن	A woman should not be	This proverb is used to

	given a leash	emphasize that women should not be allowed to become leaders in their society
همّ البنات للممات Ham al banat lilmamat أم الضكور أضانة باردة Um al-d'kooor ad'anah barda	Worries about girls last to death While The mother of boys has peace of mind	Girls are burden last to death. The woman who gives birth to male babies is preferred to one who has female babies only. The desire for son preference has not been declining; the reality is that this preference still exists.
المرأة شعر تابع رقبة Al-mara sha'ar tabia' ragaba	A woman is hair that follows the neck	Because man is superior and woman inferior she follows what the man says as the hair moves only when the neck moves

Within the Malawian cultures there are expressions that are used to subordinate women and even the perpetuate gender based violence as illustrated in the table below.

Table (2) Proverbs keep women in subordinate positions – Malawi

Malawian Popular proverbs	Literally Means	Implications to women subordination
Mwamunampamimba	Women should ensure they provide their husbands enough food prior to children and themselves.	Women and children are treated as objects who have to eat remains and have no decision making powers regarding food consumption. Reinforces patriarchal stereotypes.
Banja ndi kupilira	Women have to maintain the reputation of the family	Potential marital disputes, abuse of spouse and children and adultery if divorce is not an option. Spouses may suffer physical and psychological violence due to lack of decision making powers
Mwamunandikabudulaamatheramoyenda	The idea that men have the right to dominate women and that the women should be submissive and obey. Enforces the masculinity and justifies why men should be promiscuous without their wives taking action to such behavior	Women are subjected to psychological and emotional violence through the promiscuous behaviors portrayed by the men.
Mwamunandimwana	Chastity is women's highest value while adultery by men is seen as normal	Woman's value is equated to her sexual purity, if a woman is believed to violate a moral code she deserves abuse. Men control reproductive planning and safe

		sex. As a result women suffer in silence since they have to bear the behaviours of the men as they are considered to be young.
Mwamunasalira	Men who are afraid of violence are like women or girls	When men are subjected to violence they may not report for fear of being a laughing stalk.
Mwamunasachepa/mphongoyachiwalasichepa	A man can take on any challenges in life right from a young age	Young boys are prone to sexual abuse by elderly women. In addition young boys can be subjected to child labour since they are considered to be strong and can do any type of work.
Ana ndi chuma	People should bear as many children as they can since they are considered wealth	Women's sexual reproductive health rights are violated against since they are taken as objects of child making
Mwamunandimutuwanja/wamkulum'banjandimwamuna	Husbands are household heads and breadwinners and have to make any decisions for the home no matter whether they are bread winners or not.	Promotes dependence of women on men. While a wife may have a job and earn some money the men are bound to have authority over her income and make all economic related decisions
Bulangete la mfumu	Arranged sexual conduct by the elderly women. (Common among the chewa during installation of chiefs) this takes away the right of self-determination among the girls	Girls are treated as objects for sex during chief installation functions. Reinforces patriarchal stereotypes of tolerance to sexual abuse. Since the girls subjected to this practice are under-aged, they suffer physical and psychological consequences.

The proverbs examples presented here are just a sample of hundreds of existing negative proverbs against women. The percentage of 'agree' and 'disagree' indicate that there is no difference between men and women. The percentage indicates that some women colluded with men in reflecting the same discriminatory attitudes towards female. For instance, "Consult women and act contrary to their advice".

The study found that participants' personal beliefs closely resemble the cultural stereotypes that people respond accordingly. These patterns of behaviour shape women conditions and influence their daily lives. Thus these proverbs are all embedded into a culture that has and still is playing a major role in modern Sudanese and Malawian society regardless of their ages or education.

Proverbs affect gender differential in employment and wages. Women remain segmented in low waged work. For example, women are paid less than men for work of equal value due to gender-based discrimination, including norms that designate men as breadwinners and women as secondary workers

Discussion

Gender inequality as reflected in the proverbs, limiting the types of roles and responsibilities women can undertake. Underlying the aversion to women in senior positions is the belief that "a woman should not be given a leash" Sudanese proverb. The gender stereotype that men are superior, leaders, powerful and respected is backed up by cultural acceptable traditions. This is largely consistent with acceptable traditions proverbs. A man is a molar tooth; he tolerates the sweet and the bitter. This proverb indicates that men are intended to be strong gender. Sudanese express their preference for a male child by using this proverb 'a boy is better even if it is a small rat'. 'The mother of boys has peace of mind'. In Malawi there is a saying which goes a "man is the head of a household" meaning that a woman cannot make decisions without consulting the husband. The desire for son

preference has not been declining so far and the reality is that this preference still exists, maybe worldwide. For instance, Turkish proverbs say “let the one who bears a son be proud, let the one who bears a daughter beat herself”. This is similar to Malawi context, with regards to boy child preference it is said “a family which bears a boy child is rich and that which bears a girl child is poor”. This proverb emphasizes on boy child preference and perpetuates domestic violence in families with no boys. While people hold a gender stereotypic belief that woman is vulnerable and powerless and in need of man protection. As a consequence, men and women attitudes still perpetuate gender stereotypes in the Sudanese and Malawian societies. Given the overwhelming perception of women as inferior to men in Malawian society, the national gender legislation called the Gender Equality Act which aims at ‘promoting gender equality, equal integration, influence, empowerment, dignity and opportunities for men and women in all functions of society’, which Malawian government puts in place in 2013, nonetheless subordinated women position in society are continued to be existed.

While gender roles are changing – and are expected to continue to change – socializing agents have not. The salient causes of gender imbalance in Africa, namely the pervasiveness of oppressive proverbs, have not been properly diagnosed in gender and feminist studies and on how it can be realistically overcome (Balogun, 2010, p. 22). Women are usually appointed in low status stereotyping jobs which reflected gendered domestic routines, such as secretarial and clerical jobs which provide services to men. Women tend to be segmented into stereotypical “feminine” activities like nursing and teaching due to entrenched gender norms and stereotypes about women’s abilities and the types of work that are “suitable” for them. Reasons given for excluding female from higher positions because: ‘she is a woman’ that is enough important reason. Because ‘she is a woman’ she is weak and vulnerable, proverb states “woman has a broken wing”. Therefore, men should never accept being led by a weaken woman. Haywood, et al. (1996 cited in Bakari and Leach, 2007, p. 91) note signs of weakness in many public arenas are associated with femininity.

The fact that there are similar kinds of proverbs in different languages suggests that some conceptions of intelligence and reasonable behavior are to some degree universal (Gibbs and Beitel, 1995, p. 135). Numerous proverbs worldwide depict women as inferior, subordinately and even weak and evil. Sudanese proverb states “A woman’s tongue cracks stones”. Sudanese and Tunisian proverb “Consult to your wife and act contrary to her advice”. Moroccan proverb says: “What a devil accomplish in a year, an old woman may accomplish in an hour”. Woman, the source of all evil (Benin, Senegal); To bear a girl is to bear a problem (Ethiopia); Take a woman for what she is: a sister of the devil (Benin); Women are the whips of Satan (Arab); A single woman destroyed Paradise (Arab). If women manage a village it will become a desert (India). A girl is worth one-tenth of a boy (China). Women are like flowers they blossom in the morning and wither in the afternoon which reinforce the notion that women are inferior and weak (Malawi), Female witches are more dangerous than male witches (Malawi) which reinforce the negative stereotype that women are not trustworthy and can be dangerous.

Study by Miller, et al. (2006) suggests that children are affected by their knowledge of gender stereotypes. Sleep songs and traditional stories told and narrated to children at bed-time each night can veer a child towards cultural norms and stereotypic beliefs that can become principles for his/her life. In some cultures, without a written language storytelling was the only way to convey a society’s culture, values, and history (Andrews, et al 2010). Children learnt a lot of socially accepted traditions from the songs and the stories characters which shaped their future lives, roles, and relationships. Oral native storytelling by parents or grandparents used to be teaching tools to teach children about social and ancestral heritage. It continues to be a part of peoples’ lives in many rural areas of both Sudan and Malawi where there are still no television, Cartoon network or modern electronic devices. However, these narratives have negative effects in the socialization of children. There is an unconscious idea in these songs and traditional stories for children to take it upon themselves to save their cultural values. Boys’ children hear their mothers praising them by using such proverbs as these: ‘Jamal sheal’ literally a carrier camel and ‘metean takbar tasheel h’imli’ literally means when you will grow up to carry my burdens. This means that the son cares for his family takes responsibility for solving their problems. In Sudan one of the most popular story Fatima Alsmaha (literally beauty Fatima), it can be regarded as the Sudanese Cinderella version. One of the main ideas behind this story is reflect of gender expectations and reinforces patriarchy (system of power relations characterized by men domination of women) with the use of negative portrayals on women in society. Similarly, in Malawi proverbs like ‘a male insect is not small’ or ‘a man is never small’ meaning males take up challenges despite hardships right from a young age. Another proverb says ‘men do not cry’ which reinforces the notion that men should be strong and take up challenges in life right from a tender age. In addition, there is a tendency of

early child marriages which culminate from sayings like ‘my daughter should get married we should eat fish. Such sayings perpetuate child marriages as there are expectations from parents to benefit once a daughter is married. Social factors are important determinants in children’s sex-typed behaviors (Miller, et al. 2006). So, boys and girls expect or demand to behave in certain ways. If either boy or girl behaves differently thus they have seen as having a personal stereotype that deviates from the respective cultural stereotype. So from early stage of life a seed has been sown in children minds. The stereotypical male characters in traditional stories assist in rooting the beliefs in children minds that gender discrimination and violence against women are acceptable. In such ways, popular proverbs about gender stereotypes are reinforced.

Perceptions of women’s and men’s abilities influence employer hiring practices. Women’s lower education compared to men’s as an explanation of female workers’ inability to move into higher-paying jobs appears increasingly weak in light of women’s educational gains in recent years.

Violence against women is grounded largely in popular linguistic traditions

Gender-based violence is intrinsically linked to gender-stereotypes. Merry (2009) highlights the interplay between culture and the interpretation of violence against women, rendering it ‘heroic, justified, reasonable, or at least acceptable’. Cultures and traditions are accepted as a reasonable excuse to abusive treatment of women and girls within household. Studies that investigate the role of cultures and traditions on justifying violence against women are not common. No such study is available for neither Sudan nor Malawi. In Sudan in general there is a widespread belief that domestic violence is “normal” as the result of a woman’s provocation or “bad behavior”, thus it is a process of stereotyping and blaming the victim “a woman”. Violence against women is seen as culturally accepted practices by social heritage or in the name of religion and morality. Violence against women is symptomatic of cultural violence throughout the Sudanese and Malawian societies, which is getting more prevalent. Men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators. The popular proverbs and literature perpetuate the violence against women and hyper-masculinities. Nashwan (2000) points out there are proverbs that try to socially legalize domestic violence against women. Actually, in both cultures masculinity norms are interpreted in such a way that men (even some women) do not see anything wrong with a husband beating his wife or a brother beating his sister. This Sudanese proverb considers beating of women by her close relatives (be a husband, father, brother) as a sign of love as this proverb says ‘being hit by beloved one is like eating raisins’. The practice of violence is associated with the gender differentiation which is established in the earliest stages of women lives. For instance, this Sudanese proverb “you must squeeze her onion before it becomes a python-snake” emphasizes physical force is the best way to discipline a girl child. It advises to forced-down a girl when she is young and it is easy to shape her behavior as you like since it may be hard to garner influence on her when she becomes a mature person. Another proverb perceives punishing a woman by her man is enjoyable process, “Punishing a female is like rubbing butter over the body”. Domestic violence is more likely than others to be repeated, continuous and used as a means by which to control women behaviors. In the western region of Sudan, men think that the sticks are preferred disciplinary tools for women. This belief is enhanced by certain proverbs, as this proverb “do not keep your stick away from these three: a woman, a drum and a donkey”. Malawi a metaphor like ‘kumenyandimankhwalaabanja’ which means beating a woman is a treatment/solution for a stable marriage. Such saying has fueled domestic gender based violence as men have a perception that women deserve to be beaten for mistakes they make. There may be an international cultural consensus regarding the violence against women in proverbs and metaphors. An Italian proverb states “Both a good woman and a bad woman need the stick”. Another example from Bulgarian “Beat a woman to drive the seven devils out of her”. This is a Rwandan proverb “a girl is ready food to be eaten any time”. While in West Africa (Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea) the popular proverb is “Beat your wife regularly; if you do not know why, she will”.

Proverbial sayings which are the product of a certain culture, neither function in a vacuum nor are they used in isolation from other social and religious rules which play a vital role in that culture (Kassis, 1999, p. 19). Proverbs supported by religious messages create strong societal norms and attitude that may resist formal education. A woman's obligations to the Islamic principles and practices, confirmed by many Quranic verses and the Prophet’s Sayings, are the same as those of a man. Women are not to be exempted from any of these obligations because of their gender identity. The stereotype inherent in the name of Islam religion told to girls and boys when they were babies is that 'women should be confined to the home and the domestic sphere alone'. However, there is no text in

the Quran or in the Prophet's Sayings state that women should be confined to the home and the domestic sphere alone. The notion that men 'naturally' belong to the public and civic sphere and women to the private sphere of the family have shaped institutional structures for many centuries and have constituted a major stumbling block to achieving gender equity (Bakari and Leach, 2007, p. 90). The polygyny allowed by Islam, but it has been restricted and regulated. Some men totally abuse this law by marrying just to insult the first wife. The proverb "If a woman shows disrespect, punish her with another woman" argues that if a wife is disobedient her husband should punish her by marrying another woman (Ahamed, 2005). In Malawi sayings related to religion reinforces the notion of the spheres where women and men should belong and what they should do. For instance, there is a saying which goes 'a wife is a cook while a husband is a cheque book' meaning that a woman should be confined to the home and prepare food for the husband while he goes working to earn income and the husband should provide finances to the wife.

This violence is reprehensible in its own right though it also has consequences for women's ability to earn a livelihood.

Concluding Remarks

The majority of surveyed sample in Sudan and Malawi believed that proverbs are gems of wisdom. The study reveals that gender stereotypes have become embedded so firmly in proverbial sayings consequently they have become accepted as normal. The study presents diverse examples of proverbs drawn from everyday discourses. These diverse everyday practices help to reproduce gender stereotype as a cultural system. The study argues these popular proverbs perpetuate negative stereotypes about women in Sudan and Malawi.

As it has shown by this study, the proverbs are no more than a cultural product related to a certain situation with its own conditions and influential factors. Popular proverbs instill in people a sense of idealism. The study reflects shared social beliefs, values and norms that dictate the stereotypic images of men and women in the Sudanese and Malawian societies. Almost every proverb that touches on women contains a severe negation of the value of women in society.

Language, expressed through proverbs, is a very powerful means of sustaining gender stereotyping that, in most cases, are found to be gendered against women. Proverbs in everyday language circulated in ordinary talk. In the minds and imagination of a lot of everyday folk today, proverbs have a level of influence for respective cultures. In the life-cycle the person try to become the perfect image that he/she has of his/her future selves which involves setting up the conditions that they started out with in the childhood stage. Thus, life cycle repeats itself again, generation after generation popular proverbs help to build the gender stereotypic images. The study findings indicate that from childhood a person accepts the gender stereotypic beliefs and incorporates these beliefs as invaluable cultural values in his/her own self concepts. Despite great differences between the Sudanese and Malawian societies in their culture and language characteristics, there are similarities in the way their proverbs express, and implicit gender concepts created within these two societies for children. People in Sudan and Malawi internalized their gender roles and stereotypes and grown up to view the world from their specific gender standpoints.

Popular proverbs are visible in reality and the events of the everyday life. Popular proverbs help perpetuate negative stereotypes about women which turned these to violent. In proverb expression beating consider as an expression of love and that belief is still existed even among women themselves. Study reveals that there is still much to be done to eradicate embedded beliefs that women are to blame for violence perpetrated against them. Thus, popular proverbs are far removed from day to day existence in both Sudanese and Malawian societies.

Proverbs are used to define gender roles and responsibilities and what is acceptable or appropriate behavior for men and women in society. The proverbs in everyday speech enforce gender roles and stereotypes and even teach a child what behavior is considered appropriate or acceptable. It has a consequence that boy and girl should fit and adopt certain gender roles. Violence against women has existed in cultural beliefs in both Sudanese and Malawian societies, this violence shows up in local proverbs.

Specific policy measures to take these gender-based inequalities into account are necessary while designing development policies, or it is likely that existing gender biases may be reproduced or even exacerbated as a result.

Lessons learned

Drawing on the findings of this study:

Although gender norms are difficult to change (Seguino, 2011, p.1317), however this study suggests that greater efforts are needed to provide a pathway for amelioration of stereotypical images of women. Although there have been some positive changes towards this stereotyping, however the progress in this regard needs to be expanded, protected, and deepened.

Education can play a big role nonetheless in combating the myths and implicit gender concepts created within traditional stories, proverbs, and poems for children as well as other subliminal messages. It would be vital that children be taught concepts of equality and to normalize the stronger, more self-aware images of women alongside that of the men. Educators then would have to be, on some level, trained again to work within this construct. The government would have to regulate the syllabus and curriculum of the school with respect to gender awareness, needing perhaps a panel composed equally of men and women. Within the media, the images of women displayed must reflect a deeper respect for the gender without propagating popular stories, poems, proverbs, and concepts of women as playthings, objects and needing to conform to certain standards of acceptability.

The usage of proverbs plays a major role in the social construction of gender stereotyping and negative attitudes towards women. A lot has been done to overcome the numerous obstacles women facing and much has been achieved. Despite positive changes with respect to opportunities for women in the twenty-first century, however, the well-rooted gender stereotypes which for so long subordinated women position in society are continued to be existed. The study findings suggest that affirmative action can be of use in breaking down stereotypes against women.

Enacting gender-sensitive policies or securing more women in decision-making positions will not be effective. Changing normalized beliefs rather than piecemeal regulation or legislation. Some strategies for achieving this are awareness raising workshops, incorporating a gender dimension into language, curriculum and policies, and using non-sexist language in all forms of communication. Nelson Mandela 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'.

As women try to correct these stereotypical mistakes, women should understand that a child grows up to hold the cultural knowledge and values they are taught when they become grownups.

Future research considerations

Future research should consider undertaking a deeper gender analysis to understand the implications of the proverbs and metaphors for women and men and also establish the extent to which such metaphors and proverbs have disproportionately affected women, girls' men and boys.

References

- Abdalla, I. (1998) *Gems of Wisdom: Sudanese Proverbs and the Status of Women*. Sudan Studies Association, Annual Conference, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
- Ahmed, S. (2005) *Educational and Social Values Expressed by Proverbs in Two Cultures: Knowledge and Use of Proverbs in Sudan and England*. PhD Dissertation, Der Technischen Universität Berlin.
- Aluko, M. A. O. (2003) *THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE IN SELECTED TEXTILE FIRMS IN NIGERIA*. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 164–179.
- Andrews, D. H. Hull, T. D. and DeMeester, K. (2010) *Storytelling as an Instructional Method Research Perspectives*. Modeling and Simulation for Learning and Instruction volume 5. Published by: Sense Publishers
- Bakari, S. and Leach, F. (2007) *Hijacking equal opportunity policies in a Nigerian College of Education: The micro-politics of gender*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 30, pp. 85–96.
- Balogun, O. A. (2010) *Proverbial Oppression of Women in Yoruba African Culture: A Philosophical Overview*. *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) Vol.2 No.1, pp.21-36*
- Belafia, M. (2008) *Women in Moroccan Proverbs* (in Arabic). Publisher: Dar Toubkal for publishing, Casablanca.

- Caprioni, E. and Sajoo, E. (2011) "Gender and Identity" in A Companion to Muslim Cultures, ed. Aryn B. Sajoo. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.
- Elson, D. (1999) Labor Markets as Gendered Institutions: Equality, Efficiency and Empowerment Issues. *World Development*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 611-627.
- Gibbs, R. W. and Beitel, D. (1995) What proverb understanding reveals about how people think. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 118, Issue 1, pp 133-154.
- Hall, B. (2012) Reflective social work practice with older people: the professional and the organization, in B. Hall and T. Scragg (eds) *Social Work with Older People: Approaches to Person-Centred Practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Hussein, J. W. (2009) A Discursive Representation of Women in Sample Proverbs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 96-108.
- Idang, G. E. (2015) African culture and values. *Phronimon*, 16, 2, 97-111.
- Kalabamu, F. (2006) Patriarchy and women's land rights in Botswana. *Land Use Policy*, Vol. 23, pp. 237-246.
- Kassis, R. A. (1999) *The Book of Proverbs and Arabic Proverbial Works*. Koninklijke, Leiden, the Netherlands.
- Merry, S. E. (2009) *Gender violence: a cultural perspective*. Chichester:Wiley-Blackwell.
- MHRC, (2005). Cultural practices and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights, particularly women and children
- Miller, C. F. Trautner, H. M. and Ruble, D. N. (2006) The Role of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Preferences and Behavior. In: Tamis-LeMonda C, Balter L, editors. *Child psychology: A handbook of contemporary issues*. New York: Psychology Press, pp. 293-323.
- Nashwan, H. (2000) Women in popular proverbs in Jordan and Palestine, A psychological study of women's status and realities, Azmena Publishing House, Amman.
- National Population Commission & Opinion Research Corporation/Macro. (2004). Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2003. Calverton, MD: National Population Commission, Nigeria and Opinion Research Corporation Macro International.
- Ramaswamy, S. (2005) India's Crisis of Governance: The Women's Perspective. *Policy and Society, Volume 24, Issue 3, Pages 122-141*
- Rezaei, A. (2012) Rhetorical function of proverbs based on literary genre. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 47 pp. 1103 - 1108.
- Romaine, S. (2005) Language and Gender. In Sujoldzic, Anita ed. *Linguistic Anthropology. Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)*. Oxford:Eolss Publishers. <http://www.eolss.net/Sample-Chapters/C04/E6-20B-09-01.pdf>
- Seguino, S. (2011) Help or Hindrance? Religion's Impact on Gender Inequality in Attitudes and Outcomes. *World Development*, Vol. 39, No. 8, pp. 1308-1321.
- Ssetuba, I. (2002) Ssetuba, I. (2002). The hold of patriarchy: an appraisal of the Ganda proverb in the light of modern gender relations. Presented at the Cairo Gender Symposium organized by CODESRIA/ARC, Cairo <http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/SSETUBA.pdf>
- Vandellos, J. A. and Cohen, D. (2008) Culture, Gender, and Men's Intimate Partner Violence. Vol. 2, Issue 2, pp. 652-667.
- WLSA Malawi (2002) *Dispossessing The Widow; Gender Based Violence in Malawi*, Kachere Publications/WLSA Malawi Zomba and Limbe
- Wu, M. and Kurylo, A. (2010) Proverb Activity: Understanding How Perception and Gender Stereotypes are Formed. *Communication Teacher*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, pp. 69-73.
- Machoboane, M. M. 1996. Gender stereotypes in Sesotho proverbs. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, Vol. 7, pp. 34 - 41