

# Proverbs in Lubukusu and Ekegusii in Kenya: Empowering or Disempowering for Women and Girls?

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## Abstract

Research about the Kenyan women has primarily been conducted from socio-demographic perspectives. Such approaches, while important, are not exhaustive. This paper reports on the findings of a study that focused on the socio-linguistic perspectives that explore the place and role of women and girls in the society. Thus, this paper also set out to investigate how proverbs portray women and girls, and effect on gender identity and the implications of proverb messages to achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals. Data of the study comprised thirty eight Bukusu and Gusii proverbs related to (dis)empowerment of women and girls; ethnography was used to select the proverbs, the data analysis focused on the representation of women through the examination of the meanings of the respective proverbs using the language dominance framework by Lakoff Zimmerman and feminist theories of the Radicals and Critical Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough. The findings revealed that women are portrayed as inferior, worthless and weak and thus constructed in specific roles as domestic workers, wives and caretakers. Consequently, such specific roles marginalize and discriminate women and girls in issues of decision making, participation, resource distribution and policy formulation due to the prejudice. Such discriminative proverbs slow the achievement of development goals. The paper concludes that in order to realize the UN Millennium Development Goals, there is a need to eliminate or re-conceptualize some of the proverbs which reinforce gender parity and also reform the language to suit the needs of the society.

**Key words:** proverbs, empowerment, Lubukusu, EkeGusii, Millennium Development Goals, Critical Discourse Analysis, language dominance.

## Introduction

During revolutions and periods of social change, the rights and freedoms of the disadvantaged become particularly critical issues. Women's rights are also placed high on the global agenda because women are still fighting for their rights- socially, politically and economically. Women who are excluded from decision-making within families, communities, and nations are often the very targets of development programs designed to improve their lives (FIDA, 2006). It is a general concern throughout the world as to how nations can address the issue of gender inequalities which challenges the achievement of Millennium Development Goal number three. Debates have been carried out and questions have been posed about the role of education in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. Education alone cannot answer the questions since there are other contributing factors beyond its control such as cultural aspects. Language is one of the major factors since it lacks gender balance. Proverbs are one of the language components which perpetuate gender inequality

Women constitute the majority (51%) of the population in Kenya according to the Statistics of Kenya, October 2001 Census, and 80 % of who live in rural areas (FIDA, 2006). Women's responsibilities include being mothers, wives and home administrators. In these roles, they undertake all domestic duties including cooking, feeding the family members, keeping the home tidy and above all, childbearing. They are also responsible for the education of their children, which resonates with Malcolm X's pithy saying: 'If you educate a woman, you educate a nation, if you educate a man, you educate an individual'. The crucial role that women play in their families is summed up in the words: 'Behind every successful man there is a woman'. Kolawole (1997:63) cites a similar proverb in Zimbabwe: 'Musha mukadzi', which loosely translated means 'Behind the successful family there is a woman' Women constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property.

Language is used to produce and reproduce cultural experiences. As a social and cultural phenomenon, it is used to communicate about every aspect of cultural experience in a society. This means that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. As one element of oral literature, proverbs are also used to channel gender ideology in the society. In Africa, proverbs about men and women have long been reproduced irrespective of the potential sociological, political, psychological and economic effects which their utterances cause to the recipients. Further, the cultural representation of women in the many societies indicated the harmful effects of the meaning of some proverbs. Additionally, in most African societies, folklore has been a source of propagating gendered ideologies and women have been so represented as taking secondary roles in society. As such women who are excluded from decision-making within families, communities, and nations are often the very targets of development programs designed to improve their lives. Little attention has been paid to the role of proverbs in creating, sustaining or promoting gender disparities in the society. Previous works on African proverbs tended to interpret even proverbs about womanhood within their generalized import than within their sexist and thus ideological import.

This study investigates how Lubukusu and EkeGusii proverbs can empower or disempower women and girls and the impact on the Millennium Development Goals. Africa is a continent known for its rich oral arts. Proverbs are the most widely and commonly used in the continent's long-standing tradition of oral arts. Among such oral arts, the African proverbs have been facilitating the transmission of knowledge and conventions from generation to generation. However, before proceeding further, the following is a brief exposition of the culture and background of the Bukusu and Gusii. This provides an understanding of the role of a *Bukusu* woman in society. Such understanding will help explain why women are portrayed so in the Bukusu and Gusii proverbs.

The Bukusu are one of the seventeen sub-nations, or more, that comprise the Baluyia cluster of the Bantu groups of the East African region (Wasike, 2013). The other Baluyia sub-groups are: Baragoli, Batiriki, Bakabaras, Batachoni, Banyore, Bakhayo, Bamarachi, Banyala, Basamia, Babesukha, Babedakho, Bakisa, Barechea, Batsotso, Bawanga, and Bamarama. Bukusu inhabit parts of Bungoma district in Western Kenya and parts of Trans-Nzoia District of Rift Valley province. In addition there are also a number of Bukusu clans in the African. The Abagusii are a Bantu-speaking people numbering close to 1.9 million and they are the sixth most populous community in Kenya (UNESCO in Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000). They are settled in the fertile highlands of Kisii, Gucha and Nyamira districts of Nyanza Province. Nilotic -speaking peoples i.e. Luo, Kipsigis and Maasai surround them.

Proverbs on women are known to be harsh and critical. They are often cited to highlight a negative quality and to criticise women. Certain proverbs express a deep misogyny. Proverb repertoire of any language possesses a few that speak ill of women. Using a sample of 100 proverbs, Jayawardena (2014) examined the representation of women in Sinhala and French proverbs. Specifically, the study addressed the questions of how are women represented in proverbs in these two cultures, which aspects of their lives are highlighted, and the differences and the similarities seen in the French and Sinhala proverbs. The sample proverbs were translated into English in order to facilitate the study. The study findings indicated that women and family is a theme found in both Sinhala and French proverbs. Moreover, women's role as mother and her love and affection towards the children are discussed and much appreciated, especially in Sinhalese. Certain proverbs look at the relationship between men and women. Often, in these proverbs, the superiority of men over women is noted. Further similarities were seen in reference to and comparisons with various animals primarily to stress on character flaws. Additionally, the choice of animals was not the same in these two languages. In Sinhalese, certain proverbs associate superstition with women. Comments on qualities such as fidelity, intelligence, and chastity, create a portrait of a woman that was inferior, weak and mediocre. It is even possible to state that some are quite sexist in their criticism of women. Several examples also show that women are capable of creating an evil impact on others. The comparative study brings to light the differences and also the similarities seen in the representation of proverbs of the two cultures. Further, the study concluded that despite the cultural differences and the geographical distance, proverbs in these two languages create an overwhelmingly negative impression of women.

Concerning the position of women in the *Bukusu* society, Nangendo (1994:129) notes that, “in the *Bukusu* society, for instance, when one meets a man and a woman one states that *omundu nende omukhasi* (“a person and a woman”). When a man dies, it is stated that “*omundu* has died” while for a woman, “*omukhasi* has died”. The person-hood of a woman is not acknowledged in and of itself without invoking her gender (Nangendo 1994). That a woman is not *omundu* is socially accepted in society which reflects the patriarchal nature of the *Bukusu* society. The ritual articulates a model of gender relations which is firmly based on male dominance. As Wagner, (1970:86) observes, “among the *abaluhya* of Western province, only men can own land, just as only men can own cattle.” Further, a study by Wasike (2013) and consequently Maelo (2014) established The Bukusu Nation as a Gendered Site. Using the *Khuswala kumuse* (funeral oratory) as a source of data, the study confirmed that the ritual defines the Bukusu nation through gender. The study further established that the *khuswala kumuse* ritual takes on a masculine image in the sense that men occupy central space within the ritual. For example, the ritual is performed by men for men. Women are pushed to the periphery. Deceased women cannot be performed for neither can women perform for men (Maelo, 2014). Bukusu funeral oratory genre (otherwise referred to *khuswala kumuse* in Lubukusu language) is a cultural discourse that is shaped by masculine nuances and gender power relations. *Khuswala kumuse* (sometimes referred to as *khusena kumuse*), literally translating as ‘stepping in the arena’, is a special ritual that is performed to celebrate venerable and successful male elders, from clans that enjoy respect from other clans for their leadership qualities, upon their death (Wasike, 2013).

Based on this, therefore, women’s participation in the nation building is quite limited. Yet women play an important role among the *Babukusu*. They are homemakers, they play an important role in economic production and socialize the young in the community thus act as repository of value in this patriarchal society (Maelo, 2014). They are an important catalyst of economic social-cultural change in the society. This is so because gender relations in any society are the power relations and closely linked to relations of production. Nangendo (1994:155-156) asserts, “Women played, and still play, a variety of religious (ritual, ceremonial) roles among the *Babukusu*. They were shamans, priestesses, mediums, diviners, and diviners of ritual regalia”. It is a fact that as long as women are pushed to the periphery of social economic and political progress, the country’s development will remain stifled (Nangendo, 1994). On the other hand, the active participation of women will result into betterment of social-cultural and technological take off. In a similar way, Khamala (2009) study on the interaction between gender and ethnicity in constructing ethnic identities and ethnic conflicts between the Bukusu and the Sabaot communities revealed that respondents trace their identity through men either husband or the father, and as such women do not bestow ethnic identity. Further, the study established that among the Bukusu and the Sabaot communities, political, power, property ownership, property acquisition. Economic roles and external relations with other identities remain a preserve of men.

A study by Otiso (2016) examined the cultural values and wisdom that are transmitted through EkeGusii proverbs. Proverbs construct gender besides aligning the gender roles of men and women (Otiso, 2016). Gender construction and gender roles are intertwined since a person’s sex presents the ground for gendering and assignment of the gender roles.

Further, Otiso (2016) established that men and women knew the societal expectations that were laid out for them and worked towards meeting them. A few examples of proverbs that present gendering in Ekegusii are presented. For instance, *Eero n' eyabagaka* (The sitting room is for men). The proverb asserts that *eero* (the sitting room) is a preserve of *abagaka* (adult men). This is a room that is usually reserved to entertain important guests and it also serves as the dining room. These functions ensure that it is usually furnished with comfortable chairs. As such it is also used for holding important meetings such as negotiations or solving conflicts. Since it is not a taboo for women and young males to sit in the sitting room, the social context reveals that the designation of the room for men is symbolic. The proverb hints at the roles that men take part in, which include being the decision makers in the family and taking part in family and clan negotiations. The roles of men which are implied in the proverb show that women and young males are excluded from certain roles (Otiso, 2016). Language has also been used to advance subordinate positions for women and girls. A study examining the linguistic portrayal of the Gusii women (Choti, 1998) concluded that both Ekegusii usage and form illustrate a gender hierarchy in which Gusii men and women were portrayed as the privileged and the subjugated categories respectively. In addition, using EkeGusii proverbs, Okindo (1995) investigated sexism and concluded that Ekegusii proverbs undermine women in general terms. For instance, achievements are always appended to men and women and girls are restricted to functions such as housekeeping and home making. It is observed that such biased portrayal serve to subvert the Gusii girls' way of thinking and as a consequence, restrict the choices available for girls, especially in the public domain (Yieke, 2001).

The African oral traditions portray women in general as foolish, weak, jealous, evil, unfaithful, dependent, frivolous and seductive (Hussein, 2005). The other image of women in African oral traditions is a symbol of warmth and all-nourishing goodness. The oral traditions cultivate also men's prerogatives to the allegiance and subservience of women, and legitimize men to exercise their power over women to sustain the latter's subordination and marginality (Hussein, 2004; Oha, 1998). The following stereotypes of female characteristics and capacities among the Nandi of Kenya show this reality. As reported by Oboler about two decades ago, among the Nandi, men are believed to be more intelligent than women. Women are thought particularly to be incapable of foresight and to lack the ability to make and carry through sensible and realistic plans. For this reason, it is generally agreed that husbands should administer the family estate and wives for the most part concur with their husbands' plans. It is commonly claimed that if a woman tried to manage property she would very likely make a mess of it (Oboler, 1985).

In Africa, gender ideology figures large in proverbs. In order to better understand the gender ideology loaded in proverbs (and for that matter language in general), it is imperative to ground it within the post-modern view of language as bearer of the matrix of privilege and domination. The overtly simplistic view that language is just a means of communication is challenged by the Post-modern thinkers (Giroux, 1997). Language is "constitutive as well as reflective of our place in the political, socioeconomic, racial and sexual configurations of our existence" (Cohen, 1993: 1).

Thus in a gendered society, language is used to express how groups should behave, and relate to the external world and to each other. Once they have entered into relationship of dominance and subordination, the social groups make distinctions among themselves “through forms of signification” (McLaren, 1997:528). Language offers them the opportunity to construct stereotypes of self and others. The dominant groups use their languages to facilitate their oppression of and aggression or prejudice against those they dominate (Goke-Pariola, 1993; Nwagbara, 2000).

The review of literature generally shows that, in patriarchal societies, language is openly used to disparage women (Cameron, 1994; Sapiro, 1994; Sen & Grown, 1987). According to Sen and Grown (1987), proverbs and other nuances of oral literature have been predominantly used by males to denigrate women’s physical, mental and social weaknesses. While it is true that groups that hold the secondary position in a society predictably suffer from linguistic disparagement imposed by the other groups that hold a relatively better position (Leith, 1987), studies have shown that sexist proverbs are not used exclusively to denigrate women (Mbiti, 1988; Oha, 1998). It is, therefore, naive to rate a proverb about womanhood as disparaging just by looking at its surface meaning.

## **Theoretical Background**

The frequent reference to masculinity as a discourse of power in this study is largely informed by Michel Foucault’s definition of “discourse as a system of representation” and exposition of power. Indeed as Foucault argues, discourse in our current context is understood as “a group of statements which provides a language for talking about; a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Foucault, 1979; 1977; Hall, 2004:72). He further posits that all discourse seeks to attain power in order to control and manipulate it for the maintenance of cultural and ideological gains (1979:94; 1977). From Foucault’s standpoint it is argued, in this study, that power is not the ‘privilege’ of a dominant group (men) who exercise it upon the dominated (women). Rather it is a product of the “divisions, inequalities and disequilibriums which occur in human relationships” (1979:94) and a “discourse about the production of knowledge through language... since all social practices entail meaning and meanings shape and influence what we do” (Hall, 1992: 291).

This study also adopted the framework for language dominance by Lakoff, Zimmerman and feminist theories of the Radicals. They are in agreement that language patterns are interpreted as manifestation of patriarchal social order and it institutionalizes the male dominance over women. Different words and proverbs describe men and women in a different way though they refer to same behaviour, e.g., growing ball under skirt for a woman who shows interest in power position while no equivalent is there for men, people just praise them (Zimmerman, 1975). It is the same in proverbs that function as instruction manuals for warning young women/girls, of powerful assertiveness but encourage the same in men and boys.

Proverbs mirror society expectations of different sexes and are also used by men to exercise their physical power while describing women's mental and social weakness (Lakoff, 1975). Further, proverbs portray society in men's perspective. Few proverbs describe women in a desirable and favourable manner. Patriarchy creates an ideology that define men as natural owners of intellect, think rationally and have power to rule. Women regarded naturally as submissive, passive and willing to be led. Language is openly used to discriminate, oppress and subordinate women. This may hinder realization of meeting developmental goals since there is resistance.

The study also adopted the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) approach. Society is saddled with many social problems including dominance and power abuse. These are enacted and reproduced in discourse in ways that may not always be obvious (see Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 2001). Lazar (2007: 141), for instance, argues from a Feminist Critical Discourse Analytical (FCDA) perspective that 'issues of gender, power, and ideology have become increasingly more complex and subtle' in present times. It can be argued that proverbs, by their nature, present more complex and subtle understandings. That is, by their opaque and sometimes ambiguous meanings, proverbs often hide their intended meanings, thereby making their ideological underpinnings subtle, but quite pervasive. Proverbs can therefore serve to sustain (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements, in which the woman is disadvantaged, and these may be presented in very subtle ways. The work of FCDA is to critique such unequal gender relations. It is in this light that we find it a useful analytical approach for this study. FCDA may be considered as a subset of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) because, in simple terms, FCDA is doing CDA from a feminist perspective. We shall therefore briefly outline some major tenets of CDA which are also the building blocks for FCDA.

In critiquing gender inequalities, which FCDA seeks to do, two concepts that are useful for consideration in patriarchal societies are hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Patriarchal societies are noted for promoting male rule and female subordination, i.e. the domination of men over women. Men are seen as authority figures who hold the power, and this is seen as legitimate or largely inherent (Connell, 1987, 1995). Deeply entrenched in patriarchal societies are notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. According to Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity is: the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

## **Methodology**

Two instruments were employed to collect data for the study. These two folkloric data collecting tools were interview and document analysis. By these two tools 150 proverbs were collected. Interview was carried out with selected community elders who were recommended by the local community on the bases of their deep knowledge of the socio-cultural context and oral tradition of the society. Furthermore, most of the interviews held with the key informants were recorded using tape-recorder. In the past, there was a tendency to examine African proverbs that talk exclusively about womanhood to understand the role and position of women in Africa (Mbiti, 1988).

In this study, proverbs about manhood were included for a better analysis of the relationship between the sexes. The study followed qualitative approaches in its analysis of proverbs. Information is analyzed in a descriptive manner since it captures peoples' experiences (Cresswell, 1998). During data analysis, the researcher wrote up the notes and transcriptions of recorded materials following the data collection process. Then, in order to attain the specified research objectives, the collected data were organized based on the purpose of the study suitable for analysis and discussion. In part, this study adopted Hussein (2005) method of data analysis. Any study on African proverbs should start from the complex cultural, social and psychological factors that influence the production and consumption of the proverbs (Hussein (2005). For example, the Bukusu proverb, "*Olia sikekhe okhasimbwa*"- Eat little so that you don't overfeed- may be used to warn or inform a person who is greedy. This is an instantial meaning of the proverb. The same proverb could be used to socialize people in general so that they would know how to carry themselves around food. This means that the domain of discourse affects the meaning of a proverb.

As stated by other researchers (Paltridge, 1994; Tyler, 1994), the structural simplicity of a text (proverb) may not guarantee increased comprehensibility. The comprehension of the proverb should take into account the historical and cultural contexts within which they were structured. For example, to comprehend the meaning of the Bukusu proverb, "*Etiba seulila chichana*" one should have background knowledge of Bukusu culture about the meaning alluded to the proverb. One has to search for the interconnectedness between language and culture. These extra textual factors may include context of situation, discourse and the semiotic occurrence of the proverb. Since a single proverb can have divergent meanings used under varied circumstances, it is difficult to sharply distribute individual proverbs across distinct themes. Thus in this study, content analysis and hermeneutics as data analysis methods were used. Hermeneutic interpretative orientation is a philosophy of human understanding and interpretation of a text (Guba, & Lincoln, 1994)). The interpretative orientation used entails that texts reveal their significance not on the surface of images and representation but in the complex ways that produce, transform and shape meaning structure. Three things were considered: Interpreting the general meaning embedded within proverbs, explaining the social contexts through which the proverb is used and its underlying meaning and analysing the implication of the proverb. Since the participants were interviewed in Lubukusu and EkeGusii languages, the transcribed interviews were translated in to English. The next step was reading the transcripts and field notes so as to clutch the themes and patterns of the data.

The ethnographic technique of cultural domain analysis, which considers text as an indicator of human experience (Tesch, 1990) was used to guide the thematic analysis of the proverbs. Each proverb was characterized as a unit of analysis that could have one or more associated themes. After an initial review of all 150 proverbs, a subset of female-related themes were manually extracted from the larger collection by the researcher, using a filter of female-related keywords such as woman, child, work, lady, girl, birth, mother, marry, family, maternal, and derivatives thereof (e.g., hen, cow, womanhood, mother\*, etc.) for both literal and manifest proverb translations. A total sample of 38 proverbs were thus analysed. After a thorough reading of the raw data, and the transcripts of the field notes, the researcher categorized or coded the data in to manageable and meaningful sets of themes.



## Findings and Discussion

### Proverbs That Portray Women as Inferior, Worthless and Weak

1. *Omwimbi sakeleka enungo tawe.* (A short one does not measure the firewood store)- Bukusu
2. *omwimbi akhila omulisi.* (A short one is better than the one who cries). Bukusu
3. *Lunyasi lulala nelurura khunju sesulula tawe.* (A house does not leak because of a blade of grass that has been removed). Bukusu
4. *Obea mao okhabea raro tawe.* (Cheat your mother and not your father). Bukusu
5. *Ekhasi setilanga khwitakho tawe.* (A first cousin does not inherit another first cousin's wife.) Bukusu.
6. *Omukhasi sakambila omusecha ta.* (A wife does not reprimand/advice a husband). Bukusu
7. *Okhwibulilanga akhulanga omukhasi* (He who sires children for you will call you a woman.) Bukusu
8. *Onabaiseke bange nkerandi kiambere botaka botakoera*-Gusii (He who has many daughters is a gourd of milk that will never go dry). Gusii
9. *Ngongo machaywa imbamura etabwati* (For a region to be disrespected, then it is because of lack of boys or men). Gusii
10. *Tangori monyuomi nkogochwa, otaserie monto ntare ntorobi* (I wish I marry a husband who will not see small mistakes that will cause me to go back to my home to get a reconciliation goat). Gusii

### Interpretation

In proverbs 1 and 2, women are portrayed as short which is an image that indicates lack of intellect. This portrayal confirms Hussein (2005) assertion that in most African societies, women are perceived as foolish by their male counterparts. Among virtues intelligence is not a quality sought after in a woman in Bukusu society. They are also portrayed as childish due to their crying nature. In proverb 3, women are correlated to a blade of grass, an image which shows that they are worthless. The house in this case correlate with the image of the man; the import of this proverb also reveals the practice of polygamy. Proverb 4 shows the high place of men and the low place for women as indicated by the fact that children should cheat their mothers and not fathers.

In proverb 5, women are portrayed as objects open for inheritance whenever they are widowed. This view is in line with Khamala (2009) and Oboler (1995) studies which indicated that identity in most African societies is traced to male lineage and as such property is managed by men. In proverb 6, women are considered inferior and weak to men and thus cannot be the head of families but can only bring wealth to the family when they get married (Proverb 8). The discursive implication of proverb 8 is that women are perceived as mere objects of creating wealth for men. The import of proverb 7 is that women are viewed from the perspective of child-bearers which is a secondary role in the society. The discursive use of proverb 9 is to openly discriminate against women as weak and worthless because they cannot take charge of the security and image of the community. For this reason a man who is barren is looked down upon as a woman in the sense that manhood is measured by the ability to sire children. In proverb 10, Women are constructed as children who always commit foolish mistakes and are likely to be punished by their husbands for such mistakes. These results also confirm Maelo (2014) findings that women in Bukusu society occupy inferior position.

### **Implications to UN Millennium Development Goals**

In Bukusu and Gusii societies, some proverbs are used to discursively initiate men to suppress and control women. It is viewed that becoming careless towards women and allowing them some sort of freedom is hurtful. Hence, the proverbs above have assumed that every activity of a woman is fully under control of her husband. Men are described as hosts and shields of women. Moreover, the proverbs instruct husbands not to fear their wives, for if they do, they may not get full services from them. The society teaches such proverbs to young children in the Bukusu and Gusii society without questioning or considering the silent message or impact it causes both to boys/girls. The young people internalize them and bring about the stereotypes. This may kill the spirit of young/ women girls who may wish to engage in challenging tasks such as purchase of property, own property, consult and negotiate with husbands on family issues. Consequently, women will construct their femininity on inferiority basis. This may impact negatively on the achievement of gender parity in the society. Such proverbs should be abandoned because they brainwash women and girls. The women are thus marginalized in the issues of decision making based on the stereotypes portrayed in the proverbs. People blame women for lack of authority and being indecisive instead of looking at structures which have been put in place that nurture and perpetuate the perceived weak behaviour in women.

## Women in Specific Roles

### The Proverbs Refer to Women as Domestic Workers, Wives and Caregivers

11. *Okhakhulelela akhupa bukumba*-Bukusu (The one who does not take care of your children will make you barren). Bukusu
12. *Omokungu siomiasiomia ng'ai akomanya bwarugeirwe gose mboke gose mbwa mwana?* Gusii. (How will a wife /woman who roams from place to place know where the ugali<sup>2</sup> has been cooked and whether it is just a little meant for the child?) Gusii
13. *Mao owoasio sakhusinga wanoka ta.* (Another person's mother cannot wash you clean). Bukusu
14. *Omwana sanuna lituru lia mawe omukekhe maawe omwene nasilio tawe.* (A child does not breastfeed from a step mother if its mother is still alive.) Bukusu.
15. *Owonia owe likonjo okhaonia owenjala.* (Help a man who is hurt after war but not the one who is lazy). Bukusu.
16. *Omusani wa lebe khulia.* (A strong young man is one who feeds well). Bukusu
17. *Okoibora nokuya gwakorete omokungu monyaka ntin'gana* (Giving birth is good because it made the despised wife/woman to be a queen) Gusii
18. *Totogia moiseke kieni, motogie mwana.* (Never praise a girl for her beauty, but rather for giving birth). Gusii
19. *Basacha mbaniberani, ko' nabakungu mbaiborerani.* (Men help fellow men in creating wealth as women help fellow women in begetting children.) Gusii
20. *Mokungu ngekori, tokomanya buya bwaye otaraikaransa nse* (A woman is like one's bottom; you will not know its importance until when you sit down). Gusii

## Interpretation

In both Bukusu and Gusii societies, during ceremonies such as marriage, initiation, counselling, solving conflicts, women and girls are taught the role that a wife is expected to do in caring and securing the marriage. Women have been inculcated into the role of being mothers. The term *omokungu*, in EkeGusii, which refers to a wife/woman, is derived from the verb *gokunga*, which means to take care of whereas the term '*monyaka*' in EkeGusii literally translates to a person of loose morals, but it can also refer to anyone who is not respected in the society (Otiso, 2016). A good wife is therefore known by her ability to give birth, bring up her family and take good care of the husband (see proverb 11, 12, 15, 17, &18).

Additionally, women are not of any value but for use by men “when they are sitting’ in other words they are there to provide comfort to men and boys (proverb 19). This is an indication that women are tools by which men use to realise their desires and goals. The primary concern of women is therefore marriage. Another role that presents the woman in a negative manner is that of the stepmother. More so, a similar import is illustrated in proverb 13 and 14 criticise her miserliness and evil nature. However, the same proverb reveals the contrary. As such women are portrayed as evil creatures who cannot tolerate other women’s children. This perception of women is in tandem with Jayawardena (2014) study findings which showed that generally proverbs created a negative image of women. During times of wars, it was men who went out to fight and not women. For this reason, proverb 15 indicates that the role of women was purely nursing: nursing children, husbands and those injured during wars. Lastly, proverb 16 shows that the role of women and girls is to cook food for the men and boys in the society. These findings are in agreement with Connel (1995) view of hegemonic masculinity which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

### **Implications to UN Millennium Development Goals**

Society justifies inequalities by finding defects in the victim rather than looking at contributing factors.eg social and economic. Consequently, women and girls bring about the stereotypes by believing that they are evil and useless. The women are thus a subordinated group which has resigned to their secondary role as mothers and care givers. They have thus been nurtured as dependents and therefore not empowered. In the society, patriarchy, defines the secondary role of women whose very existence depends on marriage, producing children and caring for the husband. This portrays a state of male dominance over women. This being the case, girls will not see the reason of getting educated to take up challenging tasks because they already believe that their destiny as women is mothering, nursing and child bearing. . Such proverbs inspire men to subdue women and therefore should be abandoned.

### **Proverbs That Oppresses and Marginalize Women**

21. *Okhayiya khubalebe nga namulekhwa tawe.* (Do not wander about among the relatives like a widow). Bukusu
22. *Namulekhwa ndikhola endie?* (Being a helpless widow, what shall I do?) Bukusu.
23. *Eyapa nabulobe elipa nabukelema.* (The cane that beat the send away wife will also beat the incoming). Bukusu.
24. *Omukhasi nakhulobile akhuamba liloko.* (When a woman dislikes you she accuses you of witchcraft). Bukusu

25. *Nisio okisa omusecha wowo olisilia ne chimbeba.* (Whatever you hide away from your husband you will share with rats). Bukusu
26. *Omwana wesecha sikolonjo silinda ekunda.* (A man is he custodian of the land). Bukusu
27. *Omusoleli omulayi ekofia ya rarawe.* (A boy's good conduct earns his father respect and praise). Bukusu
28. *Embwa ebukulanga khochochomala kwa mawe.* (A puppy/dog squats like its mother). Bukusu
29. *Etagweti engina ekegwa ese gose ngina koro ya nse.* (If it does not take after the mother or the father, it will take after the grandmother). Gusii
30. *Esese eaberi n'yarusetie entwoni Bogere.* (A female dog made the male dog come all the way from Luo land) Gusii.
31. *Omokungu omuya mbokano botingire.* (A good woman is a well-tuned lyre.) Gusii.
32. *Abakungu abaya nyakomogani mbari getaa ki'amarura amasangi nguranguera.* (Good women do not speak foul words, neither are they found in adultery). Gusii.

## Interpretation

In the Bukusu society, *namulekhwa* is a noun which literary means “the one who has been left by the husband i.e a widow.” It is therefore pejoratively used and such women are usually discriminated against in the Bukusu society on grounds that they are widowed and therefore they cannot even cook *ugali* for another woman's husband nor sit at the fire stones in another woman's kitchen. The import in proverbs 21 and 22 is that a husbandless woman is a helpless free woman exploited by any man in the society. The implication is that men are the sole providers of the families and without them, women become useless and even lose respect from fellow women and men. This view confirms Nangendo (1994) position that a woman is a nonentity, a viewpoint which is socially accepted in the Bukusu society. Domestic violence and polygamy are also evidenced in proverb 21 where husbands batter their wives, send them away from their matrimonial homes and marry other wives who are also not spared from the beating. A real man is supposed to have more than one wife. Men thus control women through battering and polygamy, a situation already observed by KDHS (2014) that forty five (45 %) of women experience physical violence.

A Lubukusu proverb that makes comparison between the men and the women and the boys and the girls points out the attributes each must have. For a man /boy it is the hat (*ekofia*) (see proverb 27) which means “intelligence and skills” required for preparation for leadership and inheritance (*sikolonjo silinda ekunda*) (see proverb 26), an apparent contrast in the qualities expected from women and girls (see Khamala 2009; & Oboler, 1995); evil (proverb 24), selfish and untrustworthy (proverb 25) and prostitutes (proverb 28, 29, 30).

The act of a woman sharing food with rats indicates how women are held in low esteem in the society. They are paupers without men. In the Bukusu and Gusii culture, '*liloko*' (also witchcraft) is a superstitious concept though believed by many. Therefore, when a husband divorces a wife, the wife will bewitch him so that he does not marry another woman or even sire children with the second wife. These results are similar to Maelo (2014) study findings which revealed the secondary position that women hold in society. In proverb 31, a woman is likened to a lyre, an image presents the marginalisation that women suffer in the Gusii society. They are seen as a means for fulfilling men's joy and making them comfortable; Women's joy is of no importance to men. This proverb is further complemented by proverb 32 which emphasises a well-groomed woman. Women should not speak foul words nor are they allowed to commit adultery. For men however, this is not emphasised, an indication that either they are responsible or are not bound by such societal rules.

### **Implications to UN Millennium Development Goals**

The proverbs reveal hegemonic masculinity which encourages control and oppression of women. Consequently, the socialization process reflect men as superior and entitled to unjust behaviour and victimize women. These proverbs promote differential power relations between men and women and encourages polygamy. Such proverbs also deny women rights over their own health issues in this era of HIV/AIDS. Therefore, Women's' dignity is compromised with the use of these proverbs. In this case, Millennium goal three of Gender equality cannot be achieved in this situation. If schools and society teach these proverbs children will grow up as perpetrators of issues of inequalities since education is a lifelong experience.

### **Proverbs that Silence Women**

33. *Owaleka owamurera eyumba ne bakeni.* (The wife who despised her husband was stranded with visitors). Bukusu

34. *Kamani komweya balebe.* (The strength of a bride/newly married wife is her kinsfolk). Bukusu

35. *Chimoni chomweya sechibona ta.* (A bride's eyes pretend not to have seen). Bukusu.

36. *Omukhasi sakambila omusecha ta.* (A wife does not reprimand/advice a husband). Bukusu.

37. *Riomana ria 'mokungu tiriana koirwa 'tureti.* (A woman's misdemeanour is never presented before the elders). Gusii.

38. *Otagoita mokungu nkenoro atagese* (He who does not beat his wife will reap contempt). Gusii.

## **Interpretation**

Women are cautioned against ignoring and being rude to their husbands. They do so only at their own peril. Women cannot succeed in any endeavour they undertake without the blessings of men (see proverb 33). Proverb 34 and 35 construct women as the suppressed group which should pretend to be dumb and deaf. The society expects a woman to be patient and submissive even in times of problems. Language is used to warn women and girls of powerful assertiveness as illustrated in proverb 36 where women take the secondary role of listeners and not participators in talks (Zimmerman, 1975; Lakoff, 1995). Women are also constructed as children and are therefore supposed to be controlled by men (see Proverb 37). A man would be regarded useless if he reported his wife's misbehaviour to elders and for this reason men were supposed to discipline their wives on their own using whatever means they themselves deemed appropriate (proverb 38). Through fear, women are silenced in the society. This construction of women confirms Connel (1995) view of hegemonic masculinity. In all these proverbs, the indication is that proverbs are used to denigrate women's physical, mental and social weaknesses (Grown, 1987). This is also in agreement with the findings of FIDA (2006) that women face discrimination with respect to social and financial right.

## **Implications to UN Millennium Development Goals**

Men and boys will interpret these proverbs for their own advantage and so exercise dominance over women and girls in the society. Such proverbs also perpetuate passiveness in women. This brings unequal empowerment between men/boys and women/girls. The speaking skills of women are suppressed and this could explain why in Bukusu and Gusii societies and Kenya at large, women parliamentarians are very few.

## **Conclusion**

This paper reveals that dominance and power abuse is reproduced in discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, van Dijk, 2001). Consequently, in patriarchal societies, language is openly used to disparage women (Cameron, 1994; Sapiro, 1994). The analysis of Lubukusu and Gusii proverbs has revealed gender gaps in issues of women in the use of proverbs. Since women hold secondary position in society, they suffer from linguistic disparagement imposed by men who dominate them (Leith, 1987). In both societies women are invisible and lack empowerment. Discriminative proverbs will slow the achievement of development goals. It has to be noted that socialization, particularly, language use, plays an important role. Such issues of gender parity should be addressed at all levels of leadership. This can be achieved only if discrimination, oppression, subordination, invisibility and dependence of women to men is addressed. The society should endeavour to change the socialisation process and by so doing, bring about change of the mind-set. The paper thus recommends that there is need to eliminate or re-conceptualize some of the proverbs which reinforce gender parity and also reform the language to suit the needs of the society.

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