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Implications of the Portrayal of Women in Shona Proverbs for Gender Sensitive Teaching and Learning of ChiShona

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Abstract

It has become quite common among educationists interested in gender issues in education to examine gender insensitivity in relation to equity, inequality and access by focusing on attitudes of teachers and school administrators, assessing the biased nature of the curriculum and teaching and learning materials. This article examines proverbs on women in order to find out the kind of ideas they express about gender at both levels of philosophical and literal meanings. It also explores the proverbial thinking about the status, and attitudes about women and how this may impact on the education of both boys and girls in terms of gender. The article is based on content analysis of 12 purposively sampled proverbs. This is triangulated with information about the meanings and implications of the proverbs from individual and focus group interviews. The sample consisted of purposively sampled 10 lecturers who either teach ChiShona students or majored in ChiShona at some level or are of Shona ethnic origin. It also included 5 student teachers who take ChiShona as their main subject and 5 ChiShona bridging course students at Mkoba Teachers' College, Gweru, Zimbabwe. Data was collected through open ended and semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Overall, the article is based on qualitative methods of data collection and interpretation. The findings are that while at the philosophical level the proverbs may appear gender neutral; the literal understanding connected with reference to women in the proverbs are ambivalent in terms of gender bias towards various topical themes such as sources of wealth, achievement and sustenance of families. These findings are significant as an initial step in thinking about a gender sensitive teaching of Shona proverbs in ChiShona language teaching.

Introduction and background

The article is a contribution towards the picture and portrayal of women in Shona traditional oral literature, such as in proverbs, among others. It seeks to analyse and expose the picture and portrayal of women with specific examples taken from an African culture system as portrayed in Shona proverbs. The article also investigates the impact of such a picture and portrayal of women on the education of both boys and girls. The article also investigates the challenges and opportunities of making the teaching of Shona proverbs gender responsive. Women are pictured and portrayed in Shona proverbs in both positive and negative ways as will be given in this article with the relevant proverbs being cited as examples. On the positive side, if one were to take their philosophical meanings women are pictured and portrayed as important, caring and loving, pillars in the survival and sustenance of families and others while on the negative side, if one takes the literal meanings they are pictured and portrayed as property or items to satisfy men's sexual desires, as witches, as if they are only important when married or can bear children. These and other pictures of women as portrayed in Shona proverbs will be explored in this article. This article is a contribution towards Shona culture revival in Africa and an attempt to reconstruct the Shona system of values. Also, the article evaluates the contribution of Shona values to people's overall wellbeing.

Proverbs form part of traditional Shona philosophy and they are and is still part of Shona curriculum which educates the nation on the virtues and vices of society. Wanjohi summed up by saying, the conflict between man and women as husband and wife and in society as a whole (and which appears to be endorsed by the teaching of proverbs) need not be there. It exists because of the selective use of proverbs, especially by men. In so doing, they concentrate only in extreme positions- a woman is too bad or too good, too intelligent or too stupid, too courageous or too cowardly, etc. they forget there is a middle position where truth is more likely to reside.

Traditional myths and stories shape a culture's gender roles and behaviour, rubbing them in so much that they appear natural and biological and seemingly irreversible. Proverbs and myths concerning

women thus guide the ways girls enter womanhood and validate men's oppression of women and hence guide ways boys enter manhood. Proverbs concentrate on the sense that they put among the Shona a lot of thoughts, ideas, reflections, experiences, observations, knowledge and even world and women are extremely important in the sight of the society (Mbiti, 1988). Not only do women bear life, they nurse, cherish, give warmth and care for life since all human life passes through their warm bodies (Mbiti, 1988). Thus Ssetuba (cited in Dogbevi, 2011) noted that proverbs do not necessarily relate to what the woman is but rather what she ought to be. It is basically a matter of the way she is 'seen' and 'wanted' and not the way she is. This aims at conditioning the women's perception both by her and others.

It is against this background that the article aims to investigate how these women are pictured and portrayed in Shona culture wisdom of proverbs. As Balogan (2010, p. 2) points out:

“Though the use of proverbs may differ from society to society, what is common to proverbs everywhere is that, they touch a wide array of human concerns and activities. Proverbs are highly regarded in the thinking and communication process of Africans as a whole.”

In the same article Balogun (2006, p.118) noted that, “the debate is no longer on whether or not African women are oppressed, nor is it on whether or not there is gender balance in the African cultural milieu”, instead, he further contends that, “proverbs have served a major avenue for continued perpetration of gender discrimination among Africans” (Balogun, 2005:39). So it is against this background that writer feels it is imperative to explore the gender topical issues in selected ChiShona proverbs.

Scholarly work on proverbs (tsumo/shumo)

The field of proverbs is not new. Among the scholars of ChiShona, Hamutyinei and Plangger (1974), Chimhundu (Ed.) (2001) and Ngwaru (2012), arranged ChiShona proverbs alphabetically and explained their meanings. These collections served the writer of the current article as a corpus to access both the various proverbs and their meanings. Hamutyinei and Plangger (1974) in their research managed to group proverbs (1595) according to themes. The thematic grouping

depended on the meanings of the proverbs. These themes influence the current article in that they determine how women are viewed by society and how they perceive themselves. Ngwaru compiled ChiShona proverbs (560) and their variations and provided their meanings in ChiShona. These works do not consider proverbs in relation to topical gender issues that may sensitise ChiShona language proverbs teaching.

Methodology

The article is theoretically underpinned by the contribution from socialist feminist theory. The socialist feminists analyse the role of the school in the perpetuation of gender divisions under capitalism. Their major concepts are socio-cultural reproduction and to a lesser extent acceptance of and resistance of gender based patterns of behaviour. The assumption is that gender imbalanced socialization may be perpetuated in the school by gender insensitive teaching of ChiShona proverbs.

Sample and data collection

The article is based on qualitative research methodology featuring content analysis of 12 purposively sampled proverbs. This is triangulated with information about the meanings and implications of the proverbs from individual and focus group interviews with purposively sampled 10 lecturers who either teach ChiShona students or have majored in ChiShona at some level or are of Shona ethnic origin. The sample also included 5 student teachers who take ChiShona as their main subject and 5 ChiShona bridging course students at Mkoba Teachers' College, Gweru, Zimbabwe. Data was collected through open ended and semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The instruments used include interview guides with open ended questions. Interview guide with open ended questions was used to allow flexibility in data collection especially where the researcher needs clarification of some points.

The portrayal of women in proverbs

Though proverbs are a philosophy which has a noble idea of teaching all members of the Shona society, like all other materials generated in a patriarchal society they have gender tones. Thus the writer of this article realised that proverbs (*tsumo/shumo*) have two distinctive meanings (i)

the superficial and (ii) the deeper and philosophical meanings which though sometimes related might be far apart. Chimhundu (1980, p. 40) noted that "The indirect way which the meaning is arrived at, their symbolism, as elsewhere in folklore, enables the speakers to provide sociological models which enabled them in inculcating in their young people and in reaffirming these values and beliefs for the pleasure and remembrance of adults". If the philosophical meaning is not taken seriously the wisdom may not be effectively tapped.

Data analysis

Women as sources of wealth

Mwanasikana ndimapfumise literally means that a girl child is a source of wealth. The philosophical meaning encourages the community to value a girl children and treat them fairly. This is true in the Shona culture in the light of lobola which is highly regarded and cattle is taken as a symbol of wealth among the Shona people. This makes the girl child to be respected in society. However, literally the girls are not seen as equals with the boys but families are more inclined to the material gains that accrue from her marriage than the livelihood of the girl child and her rights as a human being. The culture also made girls to submit to injustices committed against them in the guise of culture like in cases when they are forced into early marriages in return for food for families during feminine in (*kuputsira*) culture. The girls are made to accept this as normal, thus family first and their rights are subsidiary to those of the community.

Women as child bearers

Mukadzi unozvara haarambwi literally means a wife who can bear children cannot be divorced. This means women are only worthy when they can bear children. Those outside this bracket because of age or naturally are not socially worth marrying. Because of this mindset girls enter womanhood preparing to be child bearing tools for men contrary to boys who enter manhood preparing to control women's sexuality for pleasure and making them have children. Thus women cannot afford to choose men while they themselves are men's choices. This superficial interpretation of proverbs (*tsumo/shumo*) definitely mistake them for being gender insensitive while the deeper philosophical meaning really

shows that women are important for they bear children. A husband cannot terminate the union where children exist because they will keep both in contact or probably reunite the two which is a fact in *mukadzi anozvara haarambwi*. Again it makes women to be valued more among the Shona regardless of their state whether barren or old. The offspring or child, *mwana*, has a unifying factor and in some cases marriages are served because there are children.

Women as foodstuffs

In proverbs such as *mukadzi inyama akatiza ndinotevera* women are likened to food items. The proverb literally meaning a wife is meat if she runs away I will follow. This trivialise them to material things and more so as food items to be consumed by men superficially. This make them presented and portrayed as items for satisfying man's needs and desires. This imagery literally, make women victims and more prone to man's abuse in the guise of culture. It seems women were created not as equals but for man's consumption. They are set in ways that attract men to use them in ways that please men. Girls enter womanhood with mindset that stereotype them to be food items attracting men. This leads the Shona society to even blame females for being sexually abused by men. However, philosophically one can highlight the nutritional values such as protein, vitamins and starches in the various food stuffs given as images of women. It can be noted that these three components are invaluable to health and human body well being and lack of which lead to serious illnesses and malfunctioning of the body.

Women as witches

Women, especially the beautiful ones, are literally portrayed as witches. Every misfortune was associated with witchcraft and the majority of suspects were women. This is implied in the proverbs: *Mukadzi mutsvuku akasaroya anoba* (a lighter woman if she cannot be a witch she is a thief). Philosophically the truth expressed is that no one is perfect in life. However, at the level of the imagery it is as if women alone are involved in witchcraft.

Women as gossipers

Women in proverbs are literally portrayed as sources of gossip. This is portrayed in proverbs such as *Mukadzi idare rinoti ngwe ngwe ngwe* (a

woman is a bell which is always ringing). This replicates the traditional stereotypes which portray and present women as the sole conveyors of gossip. Such proverbs, though they had noble idea of discouraging gossip, have serious gender tones which undoubtedly denigrate women. Philosophically, the truth expressed is about confidentiality irrespective of gender. However, the imagery seems to suggest that it is women who are not able to keep confidential information. As a result, the literal image portrays gossip as the business of women and not men. By implication, it may mean that those men who engage in gossip will lose their status as men in society.

Women as selfish

Women in Shona proverbs are also portrayed and presented as selfish and self-centred. This is evidenced in *Kugocha kunoda kwamai kwemwana kunodzima moto* (roasting needs to be done by mother as the child may put off the fire). In this proverb, the elderly in homes and leaders in work places are warned against selfishness. If one considers the literal meaning, it is as if selfishness is associated with mothers and not fathers.

Boy-Girl child preference

Some proverbs, at surface, seem to prefer a boy progeny instead of a girl child. For example, *Kuzvara hadzi kuzvara ndume*. Literally this means giving birth to a female is as good as giving birth to a male. Philosophically, this means having a boy or a girl child has no difference as you are still going to acquire the opposite sex through marriage. If you have a girl child you are assured of a son-in-law (Hamutyinei & Planger, 1978, p. 237). This encourages people not to look down upon those who have girl offspring. The imagery appears gender biased but it should be admitted that naming in Shona proverb is simply an image and does not necessarily mean that the teaching is directed to women alone but the whole society. The Shona people naturally communicate in riddles and euphemisms and many a time may sometimes teach people through animals, plants and other things found in their environment to teach human beings.

Proverbs with affirmative images

Some proverbs do not just portray women negatively but sometimes

present them positively as is going to be revealed in this section of the article. However, like aforementioned, the images are not exclusively meant for women but for everyone to learn.

Women as pillars

The affirmative presentations of women portray them as pillars of survival and sustenance of families. This is implied in *Musha mukadzi* (a home is a wife) which means a home cannot be a home without a woman/wife. Even in Shona idioms women are valued much in connection with family revival, survival and sustaining as in *Chimutsa mapfihwa/ Chimutsamusha* (reviver of the home). This is said of a man whose spouse died and is given a new wife, usually his wife's young sister or the daughter of the wife's brother to *revive the home*. In this case, women are portrayed and pictured as indispensable in the revival, survival and sustenance of Shona family life. These respect women so much that we cannot have families without them.

Women as blessings

In ChiShona proverbs, women are presented as a blessing in Shona society such that even an old one is better than none. This is pictured and portrayed in *Chembere mukadzi hazvienzani nokurara mugota* (even an old woman is a wife and is better than sleeping alone). The general truth expressed by this proverb is that even a small or old property is better than nothing. The literal image of women expressed here tends to liken to smallness, old age and property. By implication at the imagery level it means women are valuable even in old age.

Women and determination

Some ChiShona proverbs portray women as adventurous and full of determination in whatever they do. They always try things for self, family and community survival. This is also evidenced in the following proverbs: *Zviro zviedzwa chembere yekwaChivi yakabika mabwe ikamwa muto* (you need to try things, an old woman cooked stones and drank the soup); and *Zvinokona zviine hata chembere ichikoniwa musoro wenzou*. This philosophically, encourages people, men and women, to be adventurous and try their fortune in case they may be successful, especially in business ventures.

Women as indispensable

Various proverbs present women as mothers who are indispensable in the social needs of all in society. For example, in *Nherera ngeyakafirwa ndimai yakafirwa ndibaba inowana varedzi* (an orphan is that without mother, that with a mother will be greeted by other men). The person who suffers most is the one who lost the mother. This means women as mothers are irreplaceable. Definitely there is no substitution for a mother though you can substitute a father. This is true especially in the Shona society where most children are born to mothers who do not disclose their fathers or the fathers deny responsibility and these children are not at all treated as orphans. This is different from those who lost their mothers and left with fathers.

Women as affirmatively secretive

Women are also pictured and portrayed as secretive in Shona proverbs. This is evidenced in the following proverbs: *Nhumbu mukadzi mukuru hairevi chayadya* (a womb is a senior woman, it cannot expose what has been eaten); and *Mukadzi muuya haafukuri hapwa* (a good wife does not disclose secrets of her home). This, according to Hamutyinei and Plannger (1974, p. 411), means “a good person does not go out divulging secrets to the public”.

Discussion

The above presentation and analysis of data show the various images of women that emerge due to interpretations of proverbs more at the literal level of the proverbs than at the level of the general truth or advice given by the proverbs. The images evoke negative perceptions of women as a source of wealth, valueless unless married or have children, associated to eats or food stuffs, witches or property owned by men who will be fathers or husbands, selfish/ irrational/ self-centred and short sighted and localised in the home and kitchen. However, some proverbs evoke positive images as they portray women as pillars of a family, a blessing in the lives of people, determined, indispensable, loving, caring and affirmatively secretive. These may have implication in teaching of proverbs in ChiShona language using gender as a category of analysis.

Educational implications of the portrayal of women in Shona proverbs

This section considers the implications of the portrayal of women in Shona proverbs. The negative educational implications of the portrayal of women in Shona proverbs considered in this article are related to the way women are portrayed and presented as source of wealth, valueless unless married or have children, likened to cats or food stuffs, instruments or machines to satisfy men's needs and sexual desires, witches or evil people who can ruin men, property owned by men who will be fathers or husbands, selfish, irrational, self-centred and short sighted. These and other themes are going to be scrutinised in this section and show how they may impede the education of both boys and girls.

There is a danger that lecturers, teachers, student teachers and Ordinary level students may understand proverbs literally. Thus, they may take the images as they are especially those related to people and their social relationships while only a few lecturers demonstrated a higher level beyond the superficial one as to capture the philosophical wisdom beyond the given. This may worsen the gendered imagery of most of the Shona proverbs constructed with reference to women. Women are viewed as a source of wealth for men who are either their fathers or husbands. This is evidenced in *Mwanasikana ndimappfumise* (a girl child is source of wealth). This is reducing a human being to the level of an item on the market. This can be taken to be gender insensitive in that it binds them so much into family survival that compels them to sacrifice so much. Girls enter womanhood with these obligations in their mindset and boys enter manhood a bit relaxed and sometimes careless knowing women will provide cover for them. The girls are confined in marriages as they feel they were bought as items and are controlled by the buyer. In class or a lecture of any subject boys and girls are no longer equals. The boys will be battling for independence while girls will feel second class citizens and subordinates to men.

The focus group interviews revealed that it is a pity that the perception of women being taken as source of wealth is perpetuating in this twenty first century when people are fighting for human rights. Women in this situation will be disadvantaged because they cannot make decisions, even in situations such as when to have children and how many children they can have. Such status perceptions make girl children to have low

self esteem. The various statuses will act as labelling to girls hence self fulfilment which makes girls less likely to work hard at school. The boys are also affected as they are less likely to take seriously contributions by girls in class and look down upon them hence miss a lot since girls' experiences also contribute to learning of both sexes.

The educational implications of positive portrayal and presentation of women is given in relation to the way women are portrayed as pillars in family reviving, sustaining, a blessing in the lives of people, are adventurous and have faith, women as mothers cannot be substituted or modified, are loving and caring, are secretive and merciful. Thus from the findings it was discovered that the Shona proverbs do not only portray and present women in a negative way but women are also affirmatively depicted in proverbs, which when carefully selected, may promote learning of boys and girls alike without denigrating the girls. We have noted the positive depiction of women as pillars in revival, survival and sustenance of families, which means they are indispensable in the thriving of homes. This may enhance the self esteem of girls in schools and promote the dignity of women in general. In this case girls are also likely to work hard in school as they feel they have to be responsible as pillars of families and ultimately fend for their families. The teachers in schools and fellow class mates are compelled to respect girls who are responsible for the future of their families and a source of strength for their homes.

It was also found that women, as wives, are presented as a blessing in Shona proverbs such that even an old woman is better than not having one. This again shows that women are important in the Shona society. Such presentation of women gives confidence to girls and women in general as it imparts a sense of self worth which is needed to keep going on with life. With self esteem, girls can work hard at school and achieve higher grades.

From the findings, it was revealed that women, as mothers and family caregivers in Shona proverbs, were noted to be determined and have faith in whatever they want to do no matter what. Here there were mixed feelings with some taking it to be faith and others as adventure as portrayed in *Zvinhu zviudzwa chembere yakabika mabwe* which

encouraged people to try thing out as an old woman cooked stones. *Zvinokona zviine hata chembere ichikoiwa musoro wenzou*; it means the old woman failed to lift the elephant's head but she had brought a wage in faith that she will make it. This is a positive attitude educationally if women and girls adopt it at school that they need to try things rather than being shy. This characteristic will level the educational field definitely as boys have the same style of being confident and try out things and are not ashamed even when they fail.

From the findings it was revealed that women as mothers in Shona societies are portrayed and depicted as important, indispensable, can neither be substituted nor modified. Such affirmative portrayal in the ChiShona proverbs shows appreciation of the existence of women in the Shona society. It was also revealed that the presentation of women as mothers, wives and relatives in Shona proverbs portray women folk as loving and caring people. This is a positive challenge that girls and women should work hard so that they will be in a position to help their children. This characteristic will make girls to aim higher in their education as they feel to be equals with boys and men in being breadwinners. This goes against the traditional stereotypical grain which views women as dependants and men the breadwinners.

Recommendations

In light of this the article recommends that:

- Further exploration of more proverbs is necessary to highlight other topical gender issues not raised on the basis of the proverbs considered in this article
- Teachers should be sensitised about emphasising the philosophical meanings of proverbs to avoid teaching proverbs at the literal level
- Teachers must be aware of the kind of perceptions and ideas about women evoked by the construction or wording of proverbs.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to examine selected proverbs about women in order to find out the kind of perceptions and ideas they evoke about

women at both the philosophical and literal meanings. It also explored the possible thinking evoked on the status of women and attitudes towards women and how this may impact on the education of both boys and girls in terms of gender. The article established that there is both positive and negative portrayal of women at the level of the philosophical or general truths/advice expressed by the proverbs and also at the level of the imagery of women used in the construction of the proverbs. The negative perceptions of women evoked in the proverbs emanate from the wording used in the construction of proverbs. The paper has therefore highlighted the following topical gender sensitive themes: women as sources of wealth, women as worthless unless married or have children, women likened to eats or food stuffs, or women as instruments, witches, property owned by men who will be fathers or husbands, selfish, irrational, self-centred and short sighted. The article contends that a gender responsive teaching of ChiShona proverbs must pay attention to the literary form of the proverbs, particularly imagery, as this is the area from which most of the gender topical issues stem.

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Gender Effect on the Performance of School Students in Mathematics in Matriculation Schools in Ibadan

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Abstract

This study investigated gender effect on the performance of Secondary School (JSS) students in Mathematics in Matriculation Schools in Ibadan. It is a descriptive survey using a quantitative research design. The study made use of the Junior Secondary School (JSS) students for the year 2003-2009 from five different Local Government Areas (LGAs). The selected schools consisted of 10 schools. Four schools were rural and six were Government Area and the results were compared. Five research questions were tested at 0.05 level of significance using t-test analysis. The results showed that the performance of male students (4.02%) is greater than that of female students. Results from other studies have shown that gender disparity in performance can contribute more to classroom in activities, such as laboratory work. Upon this, it was recommended that



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