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## The Perception of Women as Depicted in Setswana Proverbs and Its Societal Impact

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents a linguistic and cultural analysis of the representation of women in selected Setswana proverbs, utilizing Womanism as the theoretical lens. The study explores whether these proverbial expressions function to reinforce patriarchal ideologies or alternatively reflect empowering constructions of womanhood rooted in African cultural contexts. Grounded in the principles of Womanism—as articulated by Alice Walker—the framework situates African women’s lived experiences at the centre of analysis, with emphasis on community perception, marriage and motherhood, and strength and leadership. Employing a qualitative content analysis methodology, the article undertakes a close linguistic examination of Setswana proverbs, paying attention to lexical choices, metaphorical constructions, and pragmatic functions. The analysis seeks to uncover how gendered meanings are encoded, transmitted, and maintained through proverbial discourse within Setswana speech communities. Findings indicate that while many proverbs reflect entrenched patriarchal ideologies and linguistic marginalization of women, others encode ambivalent or subversive meanings that gesture toward female agency and resilience. The study argues that Womanism provides a culturally grounded and linguistically sensitive framework for deconstructing gender ideologies embedded in African oral traditions. It further contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of language, gender, and culture in African linguistic contexts.

**Keywords:** Womanism; Setswana Proverbs; Gender Representation; African Linguistics; Language and Culture; Womanism; Oral Literature; Sociolinguistics

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## 1. Introduction and Background

Historically, women have been systematically excluded from power, influence, and access to resources, while men have maintained dominance over societal institutions<sup>[1]</sup>. This imbalance remains pronounced in marriage, where women struggle to escape structural oppression. Proverbs like *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* (“a woman’s grave is her marital home”) reinforce endurance and submission, entrenching women’s subordinate roles<sup>[2]</sup>. These cultural idioms often shape perceptions that women are incomplete without male partners, encouraging remarriage after divorce or widowhood for socio-economic support<sup>[3]</sup>. Consequently, Setswana proverbs frequently perpetuate gender inequality<sup>[2]</sup>.

Mookodi<sup>[4]</sup> identifies restricted access to resources as a key driver of women’s economic marginalisation, limiting their participation in wage labour. Proverbs construct gender identities that assign different abilities and societal roles to men and women, resulting in male overrepresentation in leadership across sectors<sup>[5]</sup>. This disparity is visible in academia, where women are underrepresented in senior roles<sup>[6]</sup>. Proverbs, as vehicles of collective wisdom, are rarely scrutinised, yet they reinforce deeply embedded inequalities<sup>[5]</sup>. Nkomazana<sup>[7]</sup> notes that the impact of patriarchy is not uniform—some women benefit from privilege or share vulnerabilities with men from similar socio-economic backgrounds. However, women seeking independence often face compounded hardships. Mookodi<sup>[4]</sup> refers to this as “*marriage for maize meal*” (*nyalo ya phaleche*), where marriage becomes a survival strategy under socio-cultural pressure.

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains widespread, with global patterns of proverbs normalising abuse within intimate relationships<sup>[8,9]</sup>. Women, regardless of marital status, often live in fear of violence or death by intimate partners<sup>[10]</sup>. This has prompted calls for government action from women’s and human rights advocates<sup>[11]</sup>. Labour market dynamics reflect similar disparities: women face considerable barriers to employment and decision-making positions, with South Africa’s labour market favouring men<sup>[12]</sup>.

Despite regional diversity, African proverbs often reflect shared gendered challenges. This study centres on Setswana proverbs to illustrate broader struggles faced by women in South Africa and other SADC nations. Harmful gender norms, as Robertson<sup>[11]</sup> argues, encourage risky male

behaviours, perpetuate GBV, and hinder women’s agency in sexual relationships. Emerging research underscores how rigid gender roles not only escalate violence against women but also fuel male-on-male violence.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study investigates the position and role of women in Setswana proverbs through a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is an interpretive approach that seeks to understand the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human phenomenon<sup>[13]</sup>. As such, it is particularly suited for exploring how cultural expressions, such as proverbs, reflect and shape societal perceptions.

The research adopts two methodological frameworks: content analysis and systematic literature review. Content analysis is a systematic, objective, and rule-governed technique for drawing replicable and valid inferences from written, verbal, or visual texts<sup>[14]</sup>. Krippendorff, as cited by White and Marsh<sup>[15]</sup>, defines it as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” This features the importance of aligning interpretation with the original semantic context to preserve the integrity of meaning.

In parallel, a systematic literature review is employed to provide a comprehensive and structured synthesis of existing scholarship. It is a rigorous, transparent method used to identify research trends, theoretical frameworks, methodological gaps, and future directions within a given field<sup>[14,16]</sup>. According to Boland et al.<sup>[17]</sup>, it enables researchers to evaluate and integrate large bodies of literature in a methodical manner. Khirfan et al.<sup>[18]</sup> further emphasize its utility in critically navigating diverse and sometimes contradictory academic outputs.

By integrating content analysis and systematic literature review, the study generates a distinct, theoretically grounded understanding of how Setswana proverbs reflect and perpetuate gendered social structures, while also situating these insights within broader academic discourse.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Theories provide conceptual tools for understanding complex social realities, including how societies function, organizations operate, and individuals interact. Reeves et al.<sup>[19]</sup>

describe theories as distinct “lenses” that help researchers focus on relevant data and offer structured frameworks for analysis.

This study examines Setswana proverbs to explore how they shape societal perceptions of women and the roles assigned to them. A qualitative approach is used, guided by Womanism. Introduced by Longley<sup>[20]</sup>, Womanism emphasizes the intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness of women and calls for a global community where all people can thrive<sup>[21]</sup>.

Womanism is a social theory rooted in the experiences of women of colour, particularly Black women, advocating for the well-being of all humanity<sup>[20]</sup>. It enables Black women to confront gender-based oppression without vilifying Black men<sup>[22]</sup>, making it a useful complement to Feminism.

Womanism arose in response to the perceived exclusionary nature of early Feminism, which was shaped largely by middle- and upper-class white women<sup>[23]</sup>. Walker’s statement, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender”<sup>[24]</sup>, underscores its complementary but distinct stance. Womanism centres the lived experiences of Black women, who simultaneously face racism, sexism, classism, and historical oppression—dimensions often absent in mainstream Feminist discourse. Saxena aptly describes Womanism as a “darker shade of Feminism” amplifying the voices of women of colour<sup>[23]</sup>. The Oxford Languages Online Dictionary<sup>[24]</sup> defines people of colour as individuals who are not white, a definition adopted in this study.

The exclusion of women of colour from dominant Feminist movements has led many Womanists to treat their framework as independent rather than an extension of Feminism<sup>[21]</sup>.

Given that this study focuses on Setswana proverbs and the representation of women among the Batswana—a predominantly Black ethnic group—Womanism provides an appropriate lens. Though originating in African American contexts, its attention to racial, cultural, and gendered realities makes it highly relevant for analysing Black women’s positions in Southern Africa.

## 4. Data Analysis

Perspectives regarding the status and position of women—as reflected through Setswana proverbs—have been thematically classified for analytical purposes. The

analysis is organised under six overarching themes that encapsulate dominant cultural views about women: Women and Competence, Women and Industriousness, Women’s Role in Marriage, Arrogance Toward Women, Women and Strength, and Women and Leadership. The selected Setswana proverbs, each of which includes gendered terms such as mosadi (woman), mma (mother), or namagadi (female), explicitly reflect societal attitudes and beliefs about women.

The following proverbs are examined within the above-mentioned thematic categories. These proverbs were selected for their relevance to gender ideologies and frequent use in contemporary Setswana discourse.

- *Mosadi tshwene o jewa mabogo* (A woman is a monkey; one only values her for what she can do with her hands or offer).
- *Mosadi mooka, o nya mariga* (A woman is a beehive; she accumulates more honey in winter).
- *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* (A woman’s grave is at her in-laws’ place).
- *Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng* (The mother holds the knife by the blade).
- *Tsa etelelwa ke namagadi pele, tsa wela ka mosima/ lengope* (When a female leads the span, it falls into a pit).
- *Mosadi mokgerwane, o utlwa ka thobane* (A woman is like a naughty dog that only listens when beaten).
- *Mosadi podi, o jewa loleme* (A woman is a goat; you only eat her tongue)<sup>[22,25]</sup>.

The analysis aligns with studies conducted in South Africa and other Setswana-speaking regions, which consistently reveal that proverbial discourse often reinforces patriarchal ideologies, shaping the roles, expectations, and limitations placed upon women in society. Through this examination, the enduring influence of proverbs on gender relations and societal norms becomes evident.

### 4.1. Women and Competence

According to the IGI Global Online Dictionary<sup>[26]</sup>, competence is defined as “the ability to action something successfully or efficiently.” Similarly, Merriam-Webster Dictionary<sup>[27]</sup> describes it as “the quality or state of having sufficient knowledge, judgment, skill, or strength.” Unlike intelligence, competence is more straightforward and trans-

parent, referring to observable ability and behaviour in task performance<sup>[28]</sup>. When combined, competence and intelligence make an individual assertive and effective.

Proverbs wield significant influence over societal beliefs, often shaping perceptions and reinforcing norms. Dogbevi<sup>[29]</sup> notes:

“It is disturbing when proverbs are considered absolute truths to the extent of disadvantaging some people and benefiting others in societies. Women are thought to be incapable of foresight and lack the ability to make and carry through sensible and realistic plans.”

Such perceptions have, in many cases, justified patriarchal dominance in the family, where husbands unilaterally manage household estates and wives are expected to comply without objection. This marginalisation can lead to poor oversight and potential misuse of family resources due to a lack of inclusive decision-making.

Mafela<sup>[1]</sup> asserts: “In Tswana society, a woman was considered to be a minor in a general sense.” This view stems from a belief in women’s incompetence. In a typical Setswana household, the man’s decisions prevail<sup>[1]</sup>. Kinsman, cited in Mafela<sup>[1]</sup>, highlights that men often make personal and reproductive decisions for women, particularly in marriage. Unmarried women fall under the authority of fathers or brothers, and widows under their sons, due to the perceived inability of women to lead. Consequently, women are often denied access to crucial resources needed to improve their socio-economic status<sup>[1]</sup>.

This perception is encapsulated in the Setswana proverb: *Tsa etelelwā ke namagadi pele, tsa wela ka lengope* (When a female leads the span, it will fall into a pit)<sup>[25]</sup>. It implies that women are incapable of successful leadership, whether in the home, workplace, or society.

Conversely, another proverb—*Mosadi mooka o nya mariga* (A woman is a beehive; she produces in winter)—praises women’s competence in adversity. However, given the overall negative portrayal of women in Setswana proverbs, this single positive expression appears more pacifying than genuinely affirming. It suggests that women are valued only during hardships but otherwise deemed incompetent.

## 4.2. Women and Industriousness

The concept of industriousness is consistently defined across major sources as centred on sustained hard work. Oxford Languages Online Dictionary<sup>[24]</sup> describes it as being “diligent and hardworking,” Britannica Encyclopaedia<sup>[30]</sup> as “working very hard; not lazy,” and Macmillan Dictionary<sup>[31]</sup> as “always working very hard.” These definitions highlight industriousness as characterised by persistence, discipline, efficiency, and purposeful action.

Kaufman et al.<sup>[32]</sup> extend this understanding by associating industriousness with grit—the passion and perseverance for long-term goals. He links it to various indicators of psychological well-being, including life satisfaction, emotional stability, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, strong relationships, and a sense of meaning and achievement. This integrated view frames the present discussion on industriousness as it relates to women’s lives and societal contributions.

According to Mbalo Brief<sup>[33]</sup>, 46% of single-parent families with children aged 0–6 in South Africa, are headed by women. Bertelsmann-Scott et al.<sup>[34]</sup> add that nearly two-thirds of South African children grow up without fathers, making South Africa one of the world’s highest rates of single motherhood. Children are often raised in homes where only mothers or grandmothers care for them. In many cases, young mothers in cities send their children to villages to be raised by grandparents, especially grandmothers<sup>[34]</sup>. These older women tend backyard gardens and farms, while the mothers work in urban areas to earn money and support their rural families. This is a testament to the industriousness of women across generations.

Some Setswana proverbs reflect and appreciate women’s industriousness. For instance, *Mosadi tshwene o jewa mabogo* (literally, “A woman is a monkey; she is valued for what she can do with her hands”) encourages marrying a woman based on her ability to contribute to the family<sup>[34]</sup>. The proverb is commonly used when discussing a woman’s physical beauty. It encourages valuing a woman not for her looks but for her industriousness and contributions to her household. The comparison to a monkey (tshwene) deliberately downplays beauty, implying that what truly matters is her hard work and what she can produce with her hands.

Another proverb, *Mosadi mooka o nya mariga*, implies that a woman's creativity and resourcefulness emerge in difficult times<sup>[34]</sup>. Mooka is a special type of honey produced by stingless bees that is harvested only in winter. Because of its seasonal nature, it is seen as a symbol of resilience and abundance during difficult times. In Setswana proverbs, comparing a woman to mooka means she shows her true strength and capability when life becomes challenging.

Despite this recognition, Setswana culture often portrays women as dependents. While some proverbs celebrate women's industriousness, societal attitudes and institutions frequently undermine their value. Thus, although women's contributions are acknowledged, their rightful place remains contested.

### 4.3. Women's Role in Marriage

In many societies around the world, men are expected to initiate love relationships and propose marriage. Even with the rise of modernisation and changing gender norms, it remains taboo in most cultures for women to propose to men. A study of college students at a liberal-leaning university in the United States found that not a single participant, male or female, preferred a proposal where the woman asked the man to marry her<sup>[35]</sup>. Two-thirds of the students wanted the man to propose, and only 2.8% of women said they would consider proposing<sup>[35]</sup>. This demonstrates that the societal expectation still positions men as initiators of marriage. Consequently, it is not surprising that this translates into men dominating family and marital spaces.

In Setswana culture, specific roles and expectations are assigned to women in marriage. As wives, women are expected to serve their husbands—preparing food, clothing, and attending to other personal needs. As mothers, they are responsible for childcare, including education. Women are generally excluded from making major decisions that affect their marriages. Nkomazana<sup>[7]</sup> observes that a wife could not divorce her husband for infidelity or cruelty unless his actions were extreme. If divorce occurred, custody of children and family property usually went to the man<sup>[7]</sup>. Women returning to their parental homes after divorce were left without property or children, falling once again under the guardianship of male relatives<sup>[7]</sup>. To avoid such humiliation, girls are socialised from a young age to be obedient and refrain from resisting men's actions.

Marriage, ideally, is a union based on shared values, love, respect, and commitment<sup>[36]</sup>. In South Africa, legal marriages fall under two contracts: in the community of property and out of the community of property. Religious and customary marriages are also expected to align with one of these two legal frameworks. The South African Green Paper on Marriages, No. 44529: Government Gazette, 4 May 2021, states that in marriages in community of property:

The estates of the spouses are joined upon marriage and each spouse has an equal share in the joint estate... A person in a marriage in community of property has the same powers regarding the disposal of assets... and the management of the joint estate<sup>[37]</sup>.

Despite such legal provisions, some families invoke cultural norms that undermine the law—often using proverbs to reinforce women's subordination. This resistance can lead to conflict and, in many cases, Gender-Based Violence (GBV). For instance, the proverb *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* ("A woman's grave is at her in-laws' place") is often used to emphasise a woman's duty to make marriage work. Phiri et al.<sup>[10]</sup> argue:

...the proverb emphasises the worth of marriage whilst also highlighting the woman's responsibility to work hard and ensure that the marriage works. ... An expectation whereby marriage entails taking care of one's husband as well as his extended family.

South African marriage law does not require a wife to care for her husband's extended family. The Marriage Act 25 of 1961 refers to parents only in relation to granting consent for minors to marry. Legally, marriage is a union between two individuals. The Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 reinforces this, allowing just two witnesses at registration<sup>[37]</sup>. Nonetheless, excessive in-law involvement and expectations of daughters-in-law often contribute to marital conflict and divorce.

The second legal framework, marriage out of community of property, allows each spouse to retain their individual estate while sharing equally in the growth of each other's estate upon dissolution. The South African Green Paper on Marriages<sup>[37]</sup> clarifies:

...when parties are married out of community of property, each party keeps their separate estate; however, each party has an equal share in the growth of each spouse's estate at the end of the marriage.

This arrangement is often misunderstood by many, particularly in African cultural contexts where customary expectations conflict with legal provisions. Problems emerge when, for instance, a man attempts to control his wife's assets, invoking proverbs like *Tsa etelelwu ke namagadi pele, tsa wela ka lengope* ("When a female leads, the span falls into a pit")<sup>[38]</sup>, which implies female leadership is flawed and does not bear any good fruits.

An illustrative case before the Pretoria High Court involves the wife of a prominent "megafarmer ultrapreneur" who claims she was coerced into signing an ante-nuptial contract by the husband's family—particularly the husband's father—who insisted no one could marry into the family without it<sup>[39]</sup>. This reveals how women may be pressured into legal agreements they do not fully understand do not willingly accept.

Analysis of the South African marriage laws affirms that the constitution guarantees equal standing for both partners. However, cultural practices often undermine these legal protections, particularly disadvantaging women. Patriarchal proverbs that assert male dominance foster confusion and instability, contributing to domestic violence and divorce.

While South African marriage legislation is progressive on gender equality, traditional norms and patriarchal ideologies remain deeply rooted. Cultural values—often transmitted through proverbs—continue to overshadow legal frameworks, placing women in precarious positions. A comprehensive understanding of marital legal contracts is essential, especially for women, as misinterpretation can lead to irreversible long-term consequences.

#### 4.4. Arrogance towards Women

Arrogance can be understood as the expression of an offensive sense of superiority by one over others. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary<sup>[28]</sup> defines arrogance as "an attitude of superiority manifested in an overbearing manner or in presumptuous claims or assumptions." Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary<sup>[40]</sup> describes arrogance as being "proud in an

unpleasant way and behaving as if you are better or more important than other people." These definitions point to a behavioural disposition that elevates one individual or group above another, often in an unjust or disrespectful manner.

An individual's understanding of and engagement with others is deeply shaped by the society and culture in which they are born and raised. Human behaviour, values, perceptions, and interpersonal interactions are largely influenced by cultural conditioning. As Kalra and Bhugra<sup>[41]</sup> note, "culture explains why and how certain populations and societies view, perceive, and process the status of their counterparts." In this context, proverbs serve as significant cultural artefacts, encapsulating communal values, beliefs, and norms that guide behaviour within specific cultural groups.

Proverbs are particularly powerful in shaping collective consciousness and reinforcing societal expectations. Kochman-Haladyi<sup>[42,43]</sup> asserts that many societies regard proverbs as repositories of absolute truth—statements to be followed and internalised without question. When proverbs are regarded in this way, they function as normative tools, prescribing acceptable conduct. However, when these proverbs are inherently biased or demeaning, they perpetuate harmful ideologies. In patriarchal contexts, this belief in the authority of proverbs can enable and legitimise male arrogance, especially when the proverbs in question scorn women.

In Setswana, several proverbs reflect overtly arrogant and demeaning views towards women. A striking example is *Mosadi podi, o jewa loleme*—(A woman is a goat; you only eat her tongue)<sup>[34]</sup>. Equating a woman to a goat, an animal often associated with unruliness or low value, is a clear act of verbal defamation. The implication of the proverb is that a woman's only value lies in her speech or, by extension, in her ability to entertain or please through communication—an extremely reductive and insulting characterization. This is not merely a metaphorical reference but a reflection of a societal mindset that trivialises women's worth.

Furthermore, the notion of women being equated to animals or children in these proverbs serves to infantilise or dehumanise them. A widely circulated Setswana expression claims that "hot news comes through women, the mentally challenged and children." This statement lumps women with individuals presumed to lack rational judgement or discretion. The inference is that women are inherently incapable of keeping secrets and are thus immature and untrustwor-

thy. Comparing grown women—mature, autonomous human beings—to toddlers or the mentally challenged is not only disrespectful but deeply arrogant. It undermines the cognitive and emotional capacities of women and dismisses their value as rational agents.

The contemporary equivalent of this cultural arrogance is seen in the term “gold digger,” a derogatory label commonly used to describe women perceived to engage in relationships for financial gain. The Collins Online Dictionary<sup>[44]</sup> defines a gold digger as “a person, typically a woman, who engages in a type of transactional relationship for money rather than love. If it turns into marriage, it is a type of marriage of convenience.” While the term might appear modern, its ideological roots can be traced to historical proverbs and cultural narratives that have consistently portrayed women as opportunistic or materially motivated.

Another Setswana proverb that perpetuates this gendered arrogance is *Mosadi mokgerwane, o utlwa ka thobane*—(A woman is like a naughty dog; she only responds when beaten)<sup>[38]</sup>. This is perhaps one of the most troubling proverbs in its endorsement of physical violence as a means of controlling women. The proverb does not promote mutual discipline or correction within marriage; instead, it singles out women as the subjects of punishment. It also explicitly sanctions violence by suggesting that beating is the only effective way to make a woman comply or behave appropriately.

Taken together, these proverbs construct a narrative that portrays women as intellectually and morally inferior, emotionally unstable, and dependent on male authority for correction and survival. When these ideas are embedded in cultural practices and transmitted through generations, they become powerful tools for sustaining patriarchal dominance. The arrogance reflected in these proverbs is not merely symbolic—it translates into real-world attitudes and actions, including gender-based violence and discrimination within marital and social settings.

It is not difficult to draw a direct link between such cultural expressions and the prevalence of domestic violence. Proverbs like the already mentioned, *Mosadi mokgerwane, o utlwa ka thobane* condition both men and women to view violence as an acceptable part of marital dynamics. They foster a dangerous belief that women must endure hardship and submission for the sake of marriage, and that men are justified

in exercising physical force as a means of asserting authority. As these narratives are normalised within communities, they contribute to the marginalisation and disempowerment of women, both within the household and in broader society.

Moreover, the impact of these proverbs goes beyond the domestic sphere. By reducing women’s social standing and questioning their intellectual and emotional capabilities, they limit women’s participation in leadership, education, and decision-making processes. As a result, women are often excluded from positions of power and influence, reinforcing their subordinate status.

The arrogance embedded in Setswana proverbs about women reveals deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies that continue to shape societal attitudes. These proverbs are not benign linguistic artefacts; they are cultural tools that maintain and justify gender inequality. As Kalra and Bhugra<sup>[41]</sup> argue, culture plays a decisive role in how individuals and societies view others. When culture, through proverbs, perpetuates derogatory ideas about women, it reinforces male superiority and female subordination. Challenging these proverbs, therefore, is not a matter of linguistic revision but a necessary step toward dismantling systemic arrogance and achieving gender equity.

#### 4.5. Women and Strength

A widely held perception across various cultures is that women are inherently physically weaker than men. This assumption has historically influenced societal structures, resulting in the systemic exclusion of women from certain activities, professions, and scientific considerations. The belief in the physical inferiority of women has not only informed gender roles but has also significantly affected women’s participation in biomedical research. In the United States, for instance, women were not regularly included in studies related to exercise physiology and biomedicine until 1993, when President Bill Clinton enacted legislation requiring the inclusion of women in all National Institutes of Health (NIH) research. However, even with this legislative mandate, by 2007, many researchers were still failing to comply with the requirement<sup>[43]</sup>. Similarly, animal studies did not include female mice until 2014, when the practice became mandatory. Nonetheless, a recent review indicates that female test subjects in such studies constitute only about 20% of the total sample<sup>[31]</sup>. These exclusions were largely rationalised

by the notion that females—whether human or animal—are not biologically strong enough to endure rigorous physical testing.

Scientific data support the idea that men, on average, have greater physical strength than women, largely due to differences in muscle mass. However, contemporary research also reveals that the gender gap in physical capabilities is narrowing. Notably, women are increasingly performing on par with men in certain athletic disciplines, particularly in ultra-endurance events. Despite such evidence, the perception of male physical dominance continues to serve as a basis for perpetuating patriarchal ideologies, which assert the superiority of masculinity over femininity and reinforce male authority over women<sup>[45]</sup>.

These patriarchal beliefs have far-reaching implications, fostering environments where women and girls become more susceptible to various forms of violence. Given that physical strength is frequently equated with power and value, the attribution of weakness to women results in their marginalisation across economic, political, and social domains. Cultural narratives and expressions, including proverbs, play a significant role in entrenching patriarchal ideologies. For example, the Arab proverb “*The man who cannot slaughter his sheep or beat his wife, it is better for him to die than to live*” reinforces the toxic expectation that men must exercise physical dominance—both over animals and their wives—to assert masculinity, thereby normalising violence against women. This proverb is included to illustrate the cross-cultural universality of patriarchal perceptions and to demonstrate that the gendered themes reflected in Setswana proverbs resonate beyond Southern Africa.

The need for men to continuously affirm their strength in accordance with societal expectations is itself a form of coercion. According to the United Nations Women<sup>[46]</sup>, men are often compelled to demonstrate their physical power to validate their masculinity, especially in contrast to the perceived weakness of women. This creates a dangerous cycle where strength becomes a tool of dominance and subjugation, rather than one of protection or partnership.

Contrary to long-standing beliefs about female inferiority, contemporary research and social observations increasingly challenge the notion of women as weaker beings. As Chiwaya-Kamwendo<sup>[5]</sup> argues, women around the world—including those in African contexts—have consis-

tently demonstrated intellectual and physical capacities equal to those of men. Women have proven their ability to perform roles traditionally reserved for men, thereby refuting essentialist and patriarchal claims about gendered limitations.

In the context of Setswana culture, gender roles are clearly delineated and rigidly enforced. The labour division between men and women is deeply rooted in social expectations and cultural traditions. According to Itumeleng and Nhlekisana<sup>[47]</sup>, women’s roles are largely confined to the domestic sphere—cooking, fetching water, sweeping, and childcare—while men engage in physically demanding tasks such as cutting down trees, clearing fields for ploughing, and taming oxen and horses. These divisions are not necessarily based on ability but rather on socially constructed expectations of gendered behaviour. Men are expected to be fearless, authoritative, and physically strong, whereas women are expected to be gentle, timid, and weak.

Such gender roles are reinforced and legitimised through proverbial expressions. A prominent Setswana proverb, *Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng* (translated as “The mother holds the knife by the blade”), portrays women as self-sacrificing figures who endure pain and suffering for the sake of their families. This proverb has a complimentary perspective as it honours women’s agency and resilience. At the same time, it implicitly reinforces the notion that women are expected to endure hardship and should remain within the domestic sphere. It prescribes passive suffering as a feminine virtue, effectively discouraging women from stepping into roles that require assertiveness or public authority.

In many Setswana households, this division of labour manifests in daily practices. For example, it is common for women to avoid cooking if firewood has not been chopped by a male family member. This is done not due to incapacity but as a means of upholding social norms and preventing the perceived embarrassment of the men in the household. The implication is that certain tasks are reserved for men, not because women are incapable, but because breaching these roles would destabilise the social order.

Nkomazana<sup>[7]</sup> highlights how this male-dominated structure permeates all aspects of Batswana society. He observes that:

Batswana male-dominated culture believes that male leadership never comes to an end,

but goes on, even beyond the grave. Whether it be in the religious or political sphere, the family is male dominated.

He further explains that this male bias is often rooted in unconscious perceptions and habitual practices, deeply embedded in the cultural psyche. These perceptions are not arbitrary; they are sustained by proverbs and traditional expressions that consistently place men in dominant positions while relegating women to subordinate roles.

The perception of women as physically weak is not merely a biological assertion but a deeply cultural and ideological construction reinforced through tradition, language, and institutional exclusion. While there are physiological differences between the sexes, they are often exaggerated and misused to justify gender inequality. Cultural tools such as proverbs play a significant role in sustaining these gender hierarchies, reinforcing the belief that strength—both physical and symbolic—is inherently masculine. Recognising and challenging these embedded perceptions is essential for advancing gender equality and dismantling the patriarchal systems that continue to marginalise women.

#### 4.6. Women and Leadership

Feminist theorists have long regarded the family as a foundational site for the suppression of women's leadership capabilities and the erasure of their socio-economic contributions. Within the domestic sphere, women's productive and reproductive labour is often rendered invisible, while leadership and decision-making authority are reserved for men, who are culturally constructed as "natural" leaders<sup>[48]</sup>. Hegemonic masculinity, as discussed by Carrigan, Connell, and Lee<sup>[49]</sup> is particularly useful in understanding how Setswana proverbs construct and sustain gender hierarchies. These proverbs not only reflect but also legitimise men's power over women by prescribing obedience, endurance, and submission as feminine virtues while simultaneously undermining women's leadership capacity and autonomy. Much like the framework of hegemonic masculinity, which highlights multiple and hierarchical masculinities and their role in perpetuating women's subordination, Setswana proverbs operate as cultural instruments that normalize patriarchal dominance and justify unequal power relations. In doing so, they help explain why patriarchal trends persist despite legal and policy

efforts aimed at promoting gender equality in post-apartheid South Africa.

This gendered dynamic is not exclusive to South Africa and other Setswana speaking countries. Across various societies, traditional norms and proverbial expressions serve as vehicles for the transmission and reinforcement of patriarchal ideologies. Proverbs and cultural expressions, often passed down generationally, play a critical role in shaping how gender roles are understood and enacted within communities. According to Chiwaya-Kamwendo<sup>[5]</sup>, traditional values embedded in linguistic expressions contain powerful gendered messages that influence how men and women perceive themselves and each other. These messages perpetuate male superiority and female subordination. A Chichewa proverb from Malawi, for instance, states: "Do not tell a man what to do because he knows." This proverbial wisdom discourages women from exercising leadership over men, even in contexts where they hold formal authority. In essence, it relegates female leadership to a symbolic function, denying women the practical authority to make decisions or provide direction—especially to men. Consequently, women's roles are restricted to domestic spheres where they are expected to nurture children, maintain households, and perform caregiving functions, rather than participate meaningfully in leadership or governance<sup>[5]</sup>.

Similar patriarchal structures and ideologies are evident in traditional Setswana society. The headship of the family is exclusively male; in the absence of the father, the role automatically passes to the oldest male child, regardless of the presence of a capable female within the household<sup>[50]</sup>. This transition is grounded in the belief that women are inherently unfit for leadership, a perception that is both socially constructed and culturally legitimized through proverbs and customary practices. As Itumeleng and Nhlekisana<sup>[47]</sup> note, women are systematically categorized as inferior and incapable, confined to marginal roles that are deemed menial and subordinate. This construction of gender roles not only disfigures women's identities but also erodes their social agency and influence.

One Setswana proverb that encapsulates this cultural bias is: *Tsa etelelwa ke namagadi pele, tsa wela ka lengope* (When a female cow leads the span, it falls into a pit). This expression conveys the belief that female leadership is inherently flawed and destined for failure. It suggests that

the presence of a woman in a leadership role will inevitably result in disaster, thereby discouraging communities from entrusting women with positions of authority. The proverb functions not merely as a rhetorical expression but as a cultural mandate, shaping societal attitudes toward women in leadership. Its implicit message continues to resonate in contemporary South African society, where women remain underrepresented in leadership and management positions across public and private sectors.

The cumulative effect of these proverbial, cultural, and social frameworks is the systemic undermining of women's leadership potential. Despite progress in gender equality discourses and legislative reforms, traditional proverbs and values persist in legitimizing patriarchal power structures. These narratives, rooted in deep cultural heritage, continue to operate as tools of exclusion, dictating who gets to lead and who must follow. Challenging these deeply ingrained ideologies requires not only legal reform but also a critical interrogation of cultural narratives that normalize male dominance and dismiss female authority.

## 5. Findings and Conclusion

Analyses of Setswana proverbs indicate that they often position women in subordinate roles within the societal hierarchy, reflecting perceptions of gender inequality. However, the study suggests that this marginalisation is not always intentional or overt but rather embedded in cultural expressions that reinforce traditional gender roles. The disadvantages women experience arise from culturally entrenched gender constructs that assign differing roles and statuses to men and women. As Nkomazana<sup>[7]</sup> argues, biological sex is socially translated into gender identity through mechanisms such as the gendered division of labour and unequal access to resources.

The key findings reveal that Setswana proverbs simultaneously function as vehicles for social cohesion and as tools that entrench patriarchal norms. Many of the proverbs examined valorise women's endurance, obedience, and industriousness, reinforcing expectations of self-sacrifice and submission, while others explicitly undermine women's competence and leadership capacity. A smaller but significant group of proverbs acknowledges women's strength and agency, suggesting cultural ambivalence and the possibility of rein-

terpreting these expressions in ways that empower rather than constrain.

The broader sociolinguistic implications are that proverbs continue to shape collective consciousness in Setswana-speaking communities, informing attitudes toward gender roles, marriage, and decision-making. They function as normative guides, subtly regulating behaviour and reinforcing power dynamics between men and women. Culturally, this means that gender inequality is not merely sustained by formal institutions but is constantly reproduced in everyday speech and interactions. Challenging these proverbs, or reinterpreting them through frameworks like Womanism, offers an avenue for reshaping societal norms and promoting gender equity. Future research could build on this work by incorporating ethnographic studies to understand how younger generations are contesting, rejecting, or reappropriating these sayings in the context of shifting gender relations and legal reforms in Southern Africa.

## 6. Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly restricted the use of additional data collection methods such as in-person interviews, focus group discussions, and community observations. As a result, the research relied primarily on qualitative content analysis and a systematic literature review. While this approach provided valuable insights into the linguistic and cultural dimensions of Setswana proverbs, the absence of direct field engagement may have limited opportunities to capture contemporary, lived experiences and regional variations in proverb use. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating ethnographic methods to deepen the understanding of how these proverbs function in present-day social contexts.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, K.M. and M.D.M.; Methodology, K.M.; Investigation, K.M.; Data curation, K.M.; Writing—original draft, K.M.; Writing—review and article preparation, M.D.M.; Supervision, M.D.M.; Funding acquisition, M.D.M.; Project administration, M.D.M. The article originates from K.M.'s dissertation titled *The Role and Place of Women as Depicted in Setswana Proverbs* (University

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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