

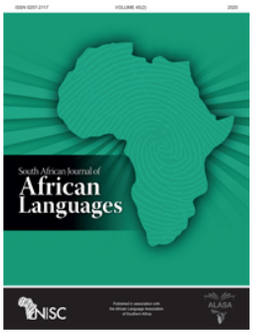
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Women and Femininity in Setswana Proverbs: Pragmatic Analysis.

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Many African cultures have been discredited, ridiculed and negated. This study offers a different perspective on understanding African cultures. The article visits one of the oldest forms of literature in African societies, oral literature, focusing on proverbs to unpack gender issues embedded within proverbs. This article analyses a selected number of Setswana proverbs and studies how they encompass feminist ideas and empower women. The study argues that the Batswana have always provided women with social and cultural power and strength through proverbs. The question of how Africans empower women through conversations, riddles, proverbs, idioms and sayings should receive more attention in academic circles. African institutions have cultural norms and values that empower and celebrate women. The article uses gender equality perspectives and feminist frameworks to analyse and examine the selected Setswana proverbs that suggest or promote women's empowerment. These proverbs portray women as powerful, independent, caring, tender and loving. The interpretation of these proverbs also depicts matriarchy as a common feature of the Batswana people.

Keywords: Setswana, proverbs, feminism, empowerment, oral literature, Africa, gender

Introduction

Proverbs are short sayings that express a universal truth or piece of wisdom. They are a type of folklore passed down through generations and across cultures. Proverbs often contain metaphorical language that captures the essence of a situation or offers guidance on how to navigate it. Because they are so succinct and memorable, proverbs have the power to communicate complex ideas in a simple and accessible way. They are commonly used in everyday conversation, literature and public speaking to add depth and richness to language. They are an essential part of the human experience, reflecting the collective wisdom of our ancestors and shaping our understanding of the world.

Koziel (2018) explains that oral tradition has always been a crucial source of history and self-identity among African societies. Africans have relied on poetry, folklore, storytelling, myths, songs, performances and proverbs as a basis for traditional knowledge. These media also articulate people's representations and understandings of social life (Koziel, 2018). Historically, the Batswana have relied on proverbs as part of their lives. Mothoagae (2015) explains that Setswana proverbs show the rich oral history of the Batswana, their cosmology, morality, indigenous knowledge systems, rituals, drama, sayings and memo scripts. Monyai (2018) explains that the Setswana proverb is a collective of direct and indirect statements that cover, among other things, idioms, myths and folktales, all of which form the community's folklore. This oral tradition is essential in uniting the community and keeping it glued together.

For a very long time, some scholars have viewed African cultures as patriarchal, sexist and misogynistic (Kramarae, 1992; Lerner, 1986; Stacey, 1993). Nkomazana (2008) explains that the traditional Tswana status quo, governed by specific laws and norms, was biased against women. Similarly, Moffat (1842), Mackenzie (1871) and Procek (1993) argue that the Batswana traditional homes were undergirded by major religious, socio-economic and political structures that seem to have discriminated against women.

Some Setswana proverbs have also been criticised for their oppression of women. Blauvelt (1901), Mathonsi and Mpungose (2015) and Mothoagae (2015) state that some Setswana proverbs confirm structures of patriarchy and the marginalisation of women's identities. According to Masenya (2004), some Setswana proverbs go out of their way to serve the patriarchal status quo, to which men's interests are always catered.

These views need to be more informed in terms of what constitutes African ways of living. They had misunderstandings about the role of a man and woman in some African settings (Geisler, 2004; Idang, 2015; Mosweunyane, 2013). For this reason, many African cultures have been discredited, ridiculed and negated. This study attempts to offer a different perspective on understanding African proverbs, especially regarding the role and place of women in Batswana. Monyai (2021) argues that Batswana revered women as custodians of knowledge and values, and as transmitters thereof. The Setswana proverbs also value women, especially in the formative development of society's young ones. Plaatje (1916) also notes that many Setswana proverbs signify women.

In addressing these aspects, the study uses feminist theoretical frameworks to provide a detailed analysis. African Womanism, in particular, will be central to this study as it emphasises the unique experiences of African women, focusing on their roles within the family and community (Ndonibi, 2023). This framework rejects Western feminist notions that may not align with African cultural contexts, instead promoting an understanding of gender dynamics rooted in African realities.

This article visits one of the oldest forms of literature in African societies, oral literature, focusing on proverbs to unpack gender issues embedded within proverbs. The article analyses a selected number of Setswana proverbs and studies how they encompass feminist ideas and empower women. The study examines how the Batswana people have historically given women social and cultural power and strength through proverbs. The question of how Africans empower women through conversations, riddles, proverbs, idioms and sayings should be more noticed in academics. African institutions have cultural norms and values that empower and celebrate women. This article uses gender equality perspectives and feminist frameworks to analyse and examine the selected Setswana proverbs that suggest or promote women's empowerment. These proverbs portray women as powerful, independent, caring, tender and loving. The interpretation of these proverbs also depicts matriarchy as a common feature of the Batswana.

This article is not meant to eradicate the plight of women as marginalised, impoverished or invisible. It only seeks to recognise some proverbs as cultural institutions that do not view women as a lump of humanity. Okome (1999) explains that traditional African avenues are available for women to exercise power. They ought to be emphasised to further the empowerment of all women.

Setswana belongs to the Bantu language family (Batibo, 2016). In African linguistics, Bantu refers to a family of languages with common linguistic characteristics in sound, grammar and basic vocabulary. Batswana speak the language in countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

Like many other African groups, the Batswana have a rich folklore culture comprising tales, proverbs, riddles, sayings and poetry. Proverbs are used more than other forms of folklore among Batswana and are employed several times for different purposes. Batswana use proverbs in churches, funerals and parties, and even when disciplining children or giving speeches. Because of the normality of proverbs, they have become an essential part of Batswana's everyday speech. Stewart (1997: ix), while commenting on the importance of proverbs in African cultures, posits that 'the ability to use proverbs effectively in speech and conversation is essential to attaining positions of leadership and respect in some African societies'. Several occasions have attested to this in the author's home background of Taung. In Taung, those who are good with proverbs can infuse them in different situations and are even called into ceremonies to perform, and they make money out of this genre.

Background

Proverbs

Proverbs refer to condensed and memorable sayings embodying some essential fact of experience that many consider accurate. They are sayings or stories intended to assist formal or informal, family or folk learning (Ehondor, 2017). Medier (1993) defines proverbs as short-known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form that has been handed from generation to generation. According to Ehondor (2017), proverbs highlight the importance of a given phenomenon, code of conduct, advice, direct order or prohibition. They are commonly used in communicating essential and profound meanings in Africa and almost everywhere.

Historically, proverbs, like many other narratives, have been used to serve various functions. Such functions include teaching children society's moral codes, instilling values, educating, nourishing the spirit and entertaining (Mogobe, 1995). Proverbs also show us the past in a way that helps us understand the present. Further, they help us develop the imagination and have a self-transformation power in that they can take us out of ourselves and return us to a changed self (Livo and Cha, 2000).

Proverbs serve as community projectors, manifesting the sociocultural values and heritage of the particular ethnic group (2014 {needs an author/s}). According to Ogbalu (cited in Dickson and Mbosowo, 2014: 632), 'proverbs constitute a language of diplomacy…the language of settling disputes among towns…settling bride price, commerce, and short oratory…they are the accumulation of experiences'. Cohen (1965) also explains that proverbs are the safest index to the inner life of a people. Ashipu and Amende (2013: 11) further add that 'proverbs are also used to add color to everyday conversation…proverbs are essential to life and language: without them, the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul'.

Even though proverbs bring to mind off-colour jokes and offensive epithets, they do not lose their artistic quality that is woven in literary fiction (Mane, 2015). Proverbs are indispensable for those who wish to understand African people (Roscoe, 1971). In most cases, proverbs are used daily as a dominant mode of communication in African communities (Ehondor, 2017). They are a core verbal of interaction in Africa (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2006). They have also been described as the part of the oil with which words are eaten (Yankah cited in Ehondor, 2017).

Proverbs are universal; every community and culture has proverbs, maxims and popular sayings formulated and collected over generations. They express social and cultural precepts deeply rooted in people's minds (Dickson and Mbosowo, 2014). Ehondor (2017) claims that proverbs are commonly used worldwide within context; they provide a specific view of phenomena of life, predict the cause and effect of phenomena and sometimes predict the future based on situational variables.

Historically, Batswana were a performative society, with no records or writing to preserve their cultural wisdom (Monyai, 2018). They resorted to simple forms such as folktales, riddles, idioms and proverbs to train their memory and adjudicate over community members (Scholes, 1975). Batswana used proverbs to advise, admonish, give direction and ensure compliance (Monyai, 2018). They were used to maintain social control and order.

Importantly, to understand proverbs, one needs to understand the context in which they are said. Proverbs are utterances with communicative purposes that depend on the speech context (Ashipu and Amende, 2013). Various contextual factors, including social and physical circumstances, identities, attitudes, abilities, beliefs about participants and relations between participants govern them.

Hence, it can be challenging to grasp and apply their intended meaning appropriately and fully without considering the cultural and historical context in which proverbs are used. Similarly, the meaning of proverbs can also be influenced by the specific situation in which they are used. In other words, the meaning of one proverb might change slightly depending on the situation in which it is used.

Dickson and Mbosowo (2014) argue that proverbs yield essential insight into the women question and the inequality in male/female relationships in African society. This article analyse a set of Setswana proverbs that promote femininity and gender equality in society. These proverbs show that the Batswana use proverbs to hold a high place for women in society, as they do for men. However, the article recognises many other Setswana proverbs that promote and celebrate patriarchy. This study focuses only on proverbs that encourage and celebrate feminism.

Batibo (2016) states that language is one of the essential means by which all conceptual and material cultural experiences are accumulated, stored and transmitted from generation to generation. Among Batswana, accumulation, storage and transmission are done through narration, stories, fables, proverbs, idioms, sayings, riddles, songs, totems and education.

African feminism

When discussing African feminism, we refer to women's role in Africa's social, cultural, political and economic matters. This also means studying women's identity as constituted by the sociocultural perceptions that define them and how these perceptions eventually force them to conform to the socially sanctioned and acceptable norms of her society (Ebila, 2015). It is best to start these discussions by focusing on the issue of gender equality in Africa.

According to de Austria (2014), men and women have a right to equality – women, just like men, are entitled to live according to how they want to live. Hence, gender equality implies a society in which men and women enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all aspects of life. This also means equal political and financial power distribution and equal rights to quality education (de Austria, 2014). UNWOMEN (2011) defines gender equality as the system in which men and women, girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections. The author adds that gender equality means that men and women, boys and girls, must be treated fairly, the same, or alike (de Austria, 2014). They should be given equal access to resources and equal opportunities, and they should be given the means to benefit from this equality (de Austria, 2014).

However, the world still experiences gender bias, which significantly influences discrimination. Women and girls still bear great hardship during and after humanitarian emergencies, especially armed conflicts (de Austria, 2014). In some parts of Africa, women are less likely than men to be literate and financially robust (Sanga 20202). When they engage in activities such as farming, they face obstacles because the land they use for cultivation belongs to males, the outcome of which is a lack of power to use the end products of their labour as they wish (Ellis et al., 2007). Women are also prohibited from inheriting family resources (Ellis et al., 2007). The belief is that if a woman inherits the resources, they will be transferred to another family under the banner of marriage (Sanga, 2020).

Sanga (2020) explains that women in some parts of Africa are ascribed low status as reproducers, caregivers, passive beings and sexual outlets for men as opposed to their counterpart men who are powerful, strong, energetic and creative thinkers. Osorio et al. (2014) assert that such binary divisions, while implying the superiority of masculine over feminine, impact women's well-being in all respects: economically, politically and socially.

It is a known fact that in many African societies, women are expected to be quiet when a man speaks, women must be respectable by being respectful to men (especially to male leadership), and they must be good mothers of the nation who do not challenge authority in general (Ebila, 2015). These conceptions have created the idea of a 'proper woman'. The African woman has always been imagined within the context of family, marriage and children because marriage is assumed to be the end goal for most African women (Maathai, 2007). A proper African woman is a woman who puts the interests of her family before even her own. She must be concerned about her family, children and husband (Ebila, 2015). This woman does not talk back at men. Silence is her voice.

Masenya (2010) states that it is essential to conceptualise what a 'woman' is in a particular culture. Masenya (2010: 256) further asserts that 'Every culture has its own definition of a worthy woman. These definitions include society's expectations concerning the roles women are expected to play to qualify as worthy women in their communities'.

Taiwo (2010) asserts that the patriarchal nature of Africa cannot be ignored. However, African women continue to possess the power that binds society together. In many African traditional societies, women are central to the family's survival (Taiwo, 2010). The African woman plays a vital role in educating and teaching children social, ethical and moral values, which are part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour (Taiwo, 2010). This is why Leith (1967: 34) emphasises the following:

> Culturally, African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits, and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children. Men were also essential in the transmission of knowledge or the youth because they had a different type of knowledge of the earth and environment and also of ceremonies and traditions that were performed exclusively by men.

In the above argument, Leith alludes to the fact that in traditional African society, each gender had its role and responsibility in forming and maintaining the family and society. Leith (1967: 40) further points out that:

> [The] woman had extensive knowledge of the natural environment; they were gatherers, which means that their communities depended on them to provide nourishment or they would face starvation. Indigenous women in Africa held vital knowledge of herbs and medicines that also ensured the survival of their communities; they were the healers.

The above indicates that women's role in traditional Africa is a sine qua non to societal development (Taiwo, 2010). Historically, African proverbs were used in conjunction with such situations when women had unequivocal powers in societies.

Okome (1999) explains that African women still have power in society; they lead families, kinship groups, communities, ethnic groups and states. African women have power as mothers in relation to their children, regardless of age. They have power as wives; for example, the first wife has more power than other co-wives in polygamous marriages (Okome, 1999). Oyewumi (1997) argues that applying Western gender categories to African societies is to erase the real-life experiences of Africans. Okome (1999) argues that as a woman, a person may be influential in some aspects and weak in others. Hence, women in Africa are not precluded from exercising power, even ordinary women who are poor (Okome, 1999).

According to Mwania (2021), many African cultures honour and respect women for their societal roles. Amadiume (2015) and Dube (2006) corroborate this and state that the subordination of women as a practice is foreign to African culture. They argue that African cultures always had social structures that respected and held women highly because of the life-sustaining powers inherent in women.

In many African societies, women also play a central role in the political sphere. Suffice it to say that in many societies, especially matrilineal ones, power is based on seniority rather than gender (Mwania, 2009). Contrary to the Western perspectives, in such communities, women are not confined to the household; they have vital roles to play in the political arena, and those of their male counterparts do not subordinate their roles; they complement each other (Mwania, 2021). Historically, women such as Donna Veronica and Donna Susanne di Nobrera, had essential social functions as regents, co-regents, city founders, army officers, soldiers and bodyguards (Loth, 1987).

African women knew a kind of political system that permitted women's representation in the governance and administration of society (Mwania, 2021). Communities such as the Akan and the Twi of Ghana, the Baganda of Uganda, the Shona of Zimbabwe, the Loango of Congo and some tribes in Ethiopia, Rwanda and Nigeria always had female political representatives in the person of the Queen, who were entrusted with special powers besides those of the Chief. Sometimes, these women had more power and autonomy over all their subjects, and their words were authoritative and binding (Mwania, 2021).

In the economic sphere, African women have always had vital roles in production. Mwaura (2005) notes that women had crucial roles in agriculture, manufacturing and trade among the settled and the nomadic groups. In these communities, women formed a basic unit of economic production (Mwania, 2021). Amadiume (2015) and Oduyoye (1995) highlight that, in precolonial Africa, women had vital roles in their community's financial well-being. In Kenya, women had a land monopoly among the Kamba, Gikuyu and other Bantu-speaking groups (Mwania, 2021). They were the primary food producers and determined how land should be used.

However, colonialism significantly impacted women's power and status in Africa. With the arrival of colonialism, many structures that protected and promoted gender equality in Africa were undermined or outright dismantled, leading to a decline in women's power and agency. Agbaje (2019) argues that while some historians and feminist writers have elucidated the complementary roles of men and women in precolonial Africa, colonialism had profound implications on existing intergroup structures. Colonial institutions gave more recognition to men than to women. Therefore, it affected different aspects of female African lives when compared to their male counterparts.

Colonial administrators did not recognise the status of women in the economic or socio-political life of the communities (Unumen, 2005). The introduction of cash crops and the technological advancement that came with them only benefitted men, thereby upsetting the balance of labour between men and women (Unumen, 2005). These changes discouraged women from participating in cash-crop farming (Maugarita and Nwangama cited in Unemen, 2005).

The colonial administrators also showed a severe cultural bias in the economic sector. They preferred male nationals in recruitment for administrative, clerical, secretarial and other jobs (Unemen, 2005). British administrators had dealings with only male chiefs and headmen. Young boys were encouraged to obtain education when the need to produce and educate white collar workers developed. Hence, while female institutions atrophied, male nationals were used to fill all development institutions (Barbara, 1983).

In analysing the feminist aspects of Setswana proverbs, the study employs the African Womanism framework to provide a nuanced understanding of African women's roles and experiences. African Womanism, as a theoretical approach, emphasises the unique experiences of African women by focusing on their integral roles within the family and community (Ndonibi, 2023). This framework addresses the limitations of Western feminist notions, which often do not align with African societies' cultural and social contexts (Hudson-Weems, 1993).

African Womanism rejects the universal application of Western feminist ideas, recognising that African women's realities are shaped by their specific cultural, historical and social environments (Hudson-Weems, 1993). By emphasising the importance of family and community, African Womanism acknowledges that African women derive strength and identity from their roles as caregivers, educators and central figures in societal cohesion.

This framework influences the analysis by highlighting how Setswana proverbs reflect and reinforce the cultural values that support women's roles within their communities. It allows for examining how these proverbs convey wisdom and perpetuate cultural norms and expectations unique to African societies.

Methodology

This article analyses a selected number of Setswana proverbs and studies how they encompass feminist ideas and empower women. Thus, the following research questions are answered: What are the features of matriarchy in Setswana proverbs? What is the role and status of women in Batswana society according to the Setswana proverbs? Are women presented in the Setswana proverbs to possess features of leadership and strength?

To answer these questions, nine proverbs were purposely selected from a written high school textbook, *E Antswe Letseleng: Setlhopa sa 10* (Ntsime, 1993). This textbook lists Setswana proverbs, idioms and riddles. The study adopted a stylistic analysis approach to explore the meaning of the chosen proverbs. This studies the literary and verbal language style and the effect(s) the writer or the speaker wishes to communicate to the hearer (Catano, 1998). Bradford (1997) states that stylistics enables scholars to identify and name literary texts' distinguishing features and specify the generic and structural sub-divisions of literature.

Using stylistic analysis, the study used the linguistic theory of meaning to explore the meaning in the proverbs. The theory refers to studying how words and phrases convey meaning in language. This involves the analysis of the relationship between words, their meanings and how they are used in sentences and discourse. This theory states that meaning could be descriptive, expressive or evocative (Adesida, 2015).

There are different levels of stylistic analysis: 1. Phonological level. 2. Graphological level. 3. Grammatical level. 4. Pragmatic level. 5. Conversation or discourse analysis. The current study analyses proverbs using only the pragmatic level.

The pragmatic analysis focuses on how people interpret the meanings that arise from producing utterances in context (Hashem and Muhi, 2021). According to Grice (1989) meaning goes beyond what is said. Meaning can be 'broadly classified as speaker-intended implications, that is, meanings that are implied or suggested rather than said' (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014: 81). Hashem and Muhi (2021) argue that proverbs always contain two kinds of meaning: their literal or primary meaning and their more profound or implicated meaning. The latter is not apparent, and one needs social and cultural background knowledge to understand this meaning.

Findings

The table below presents the study findings. In these findings, I outline the literal and deeper meanings of the selected Setswana proverbs that celebrate femininity.

Proverbs about the role of women in society

Mosadi mooka o nya le mariga.
This proverb compares a woman to a '*mooka'* (*acacia karoo*), a thorny, deciduous tree used as a source of

Table 1 Proverbs about the role of women

Proverbs	Literal meaning	Deeper meaning
Proverbs about the role of women in society		
Mosadi mooka o nya le mariga	A woman can devise a plan where men fail.	A woman can take over and cover the gap where a man fails.
Masadi ga a jewe matlho e se kgomo	A woman is not judged by her beauty alone but by her ability to build a family.	The woman's personality builds a home and family, not just looks.
Mmagwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng	A mother will always face hardships for her family.	A mother is willing to go to the extreme for the sake of her children and family.
Proverbs about the role of women at home		
Mosadi, tshwene o jewa mabogo	A woman is judged by her handiness and not beauty alone.	A woman who is a hard worker can take care of her household and family.
Mosadi phate o alelwa baeng	A woman welcomes visitors much better than a man.	A household with a woman is more comfortable, warm and welcoming than one without a woman.
Motse o lwapeng	A woman builds a household.	While a man builds the house, a woman makes it a home.
Proverbs about a woman's attributes		
Ga a nyala mosadi, o nyetse monna	A woman is always hardworking, more than a man.	A woman is as strong, courageous and hardworking as a man.
Mosadi ntswa, o okwa ke lerapo	A woman is to be wooed and pampered.	A woman that is taken care of is always happy and caring.
Ga a montle matho, montle pelo	A woman is not physically beautiful, but her heart is.	A woman may not be beautiful in her face but has a good heart.

firewood, building material and traditional medicine. When it loses its leaves in winter, it continues to be useful. In this instance, a woman is compared to this tree; when a man fails to provide for and protect his family, a woman can devise a plan to save the family and the household. The proverb suggests that, like an *acacia karoo*, a woman is always helpful, even in difficult times. The proverb is used in the following contexts: celebrating women's resilience (the proverb can be used to praise and acknowledge a woman's strength and resilience in facing and overcoming challenges), appreciating nurturing roles (it may be used to highlight the nurturing role of women within families and communities, emphasising their ability to provide care and support consistently), encouragement and support (the proverb can be used to encourage women to continue being supportive and nurturing, reinforcing the value of their contributions), teaching values (it can be employed in educational settings or storytelling to impart cultural values related to the respect and appreciation of women's roles in society) and recognising contributions (the proverb is appropriate in contexts where the contributions of women are being recognised, such as during celebrations, speeches or ceremonies that honour women).

Masadi ga a jewe matlho e se kgomo.
The proverb acknowledges that beauty is not the only measure that should be used to judge a woman. This proverb shows that women must be judged based on their ability to hold the household and family together. The proverb suggests that some women might not be physically beautiful, but they have other characteristics that make them suitable to care for their household. Contexts in which this proverb is used include promoting respect and dignity (the proverb is used to teach and remind individuals, especially men, to respect women and treat them with dignity rather than viewing them as objects of desire), addressing gender equality (it may be used in discussions or teachings about gender equality, highlighting the importance of viewing women as equals rather than mere possessions or objects), challenging misogyny and objectification (the proverb can be employed to challenge and criticise behaviours or attitudes that objectify women, such as catcalling, harassment or treating women as commodities), teaching cultural and moral values (it can be used in educational settings, such as during cultural lessons, moral teachings or storytelling, to impart values of respect and proper conduct towards women) and encouraging positive behaviour (the proverb serves as a reminder for young men and boys to develop respectful attitudes and behaviours towards women from an early age, promoting healthy and respectful relationships).

Mmagwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng.
This means that a mother is willing to sacrifice herself and her well-being to do what is best for her family and children. The proverb indicates that a mother is not greedy and cannot stand by and watch her family and children suffer. A mother will do everything possible for her family. This proverb is usually used in the following contexts: acknowledging maternal sacrifices (the proverb is used to recognise and honour the sacrifices that mothers make for their children and families. It highlights the lengths to which a mother will go to protect and provide for her loved ones, even if it means enduring personal pain or difficulty), celebrating mothers' strength and resilience (it can be used during celebrations such as Mother's Day, birthdays or other events that honour mothers, emphasising their strength, resilience and unwavering support), encouraging selflessness (the proverb is sometimes used to motivate individuals to be selfless and considerate, drawing inspiration from the example set by mothers who put their children's needs above their own), moral and cultural teachings (it is used in educational settings, storytelling or cultural teachings to impart values related to selflessness, bravery and the critical role of mothers in the family and community), the context of family challenges (the proverb can be referenced when discussing family challenges or hardships, acknowledging the pivotal role of mothers in navigating and overcoming such difficulties), and public speeches and writings (it is often cited in speeches, writings or discussions that focus on the role of women and mothers in society, highlighting their contributions and the strength they demonstrate in various situations).

Proverbs about the role of women at home

Mosadi, tshwene o jewa mabogo.
This proverb suggests that a hardworking woman may not need a man as she can take care of her household and family. The proverb shows that not all women need a man in their lives. Because the one who works hard can do everything for themselves and their families, the proverb compares a woman to a baboon; it does not have a beautiful face but can care for its babies and family. Contexts in which the proverb is used include acknowledging women's contributions (the proverb is used to recognise and appreciate women's hard work and efforts, whether in the home, workplace or community. It underscores that a woman's value is seen in her actions and contributions), encouraging industriousness (it can be used to motivate and encourage women to be industrious, proactive and diligent in their endeavours, suggesting that their efforts will be recognised and valued), promoting gender equality (the proverb might be referenced in discussions about gender equality to highlight that women's work and contributions should be respected and valued equally to men's), teaching cultural and moral values (it is often used in educational settings, storytelling or cultural teachings to impart values related to hard work, dedication and the importance of contributing meaningfully to society), and addressing women's roles (it may be used in conversations about the roles and expectations of women, highlighting that their value lies not in their appearance but in their efforts and work).

Mosadi phate o alelwa baeng.
The proverb means that a woman can make a household comfortable for everyone. This proverb puts value on women and sees them as generous and welcoming people. The proverb compares a woman to a '*phate'* (a goat skin spread on the ground as a bed). Among the Batswana, that is a normal thing, especially in villages. *Phate* is highly

attractive, gratifying and comfortable to sleep on. In this proverb, a woman gives these attributes: a woman can make a home attractive, gratifying and comfortable. This proverb is usually used in the following contexts: promoting hospitality (this proverb is often used to emphasise the importance of hospitality, especially in a cultural context where welcoming guests and making them feel comfortable is highly valued. It underscores the traditional role of women in extending hospitality), commending generosity and kindness (the proverb may be used to praise a woman for her generosity, kindness and ability to make guests feel welcome, much like a well-laid mat invites people to sit and stay), celebratory occasions (during events or gatherings that celebrate women, such as Women's Day or community festivals, this proverb can be used in speeches to honour women's contributions to maintaining the cultural value of hospitality), and reflecting on social roles (it might be referenced in discussions about social roles and responsibilities, highlighting the central role women often play in the social fabric of their communities).

Motse o lwapeng.
This proverb does not disregard a woman's role in building a household. It acknowledges that a man builds a house (the physical structure), but a woman makes it a home. This proverb clearly shows that men and women are equal; none is more important than the other in building a home. The proverb suggests that a woman holds the household together, making it look and feel like a home. This proverb is ideal for the following contexts: promoting gender equality (the proverb is used to underscore the equal importance of men and women in building and maintaining a household. It emphasises that both genders contribute significantly to the creation of a home), acknowledging women's contributions (it is often invoked to recognise and appreciate the often-overlooked work that women do in managing and maintaining the household, ensuring it is a comfortable and welcoming place), marriage and family counselling (in contexts of marriage or family counselling, this proverb might be used to encourage couples to value each other's contributions and to work together harmoniously to build a successful home), and cultural celebrations (at cultural events or celebrations, the proverb may be cited to honour the roles of both men and women in the community and to celebrate the harmony and balance they bring to the household).

Proverbs about a woman's attributes

Ga a nyala mosadi, o nyetse monna.
The proverb means that women are hardworking and courageous, just like men. The proverb debunks the notion that only men are hardworking. This proverb clearly shows that women can also work as hard as men. The proverb is used in various contexts, including encouraging gender equality (when discussing gender roles and the capabilities of women, this proverb is used to highlight that women are just as hardworking and courageous as men. It serves to debunk stereotypes that undermine women's efforts and contributions), empowerment conversations (in conversations aimed at empowering women and recognising their efforts, this proverb can be employed to emphasise that women can work just as hard as men and should be acknowledged for their capabilities), and community meetings (during community gatherings, the proverb is used to stress the importance of recognising and valuing the contributions of both men and women equally in building and sustaining the community).

Mosadi ntswa, o okwa ke lerapo.
The proverb reveals some of the emotional attributes of women, such as their liking to be pampered and spoiled. By comparing women to a dog, the proverb focuses only on specific attributes of a dog, such that when it is taken care of, it will be loyal and good to its owner. In this case, the proverb suggests that when a man takes care of his woman, she will be good to him and take care of him. This proverb can be used in the following contexts: cultural teachings (this proverb is often used in discussions about relationships and marriage to emphasise the importance of treating one's partner with care and respect. It suggests that a man can expect loyalty, love and care by pampering and treating a woman well), appreciation of women (the proverb can be employed to express appreciation for the nurturing and supportive roles that women often play in families and communities. It underscores the value of women's contributions when treated kindly and with consideration), encouraging respectful behaviour (when addressing issues of gender dynamics and respect, the proverb encourages men to treat women with kindness and consideration, highlighting that such treatment fosters positive relationships), and reflecting on emotional needs (it may also be used in discussions about emotional needs and expressions within relationships, suggesting that women, like anyone else, appreciate and respond to care and affection).

Ga a montle matho, montle pelo.
This proverb also means that not all women have beautiful physical features; there are women with good hearts. The proverb suggests two types of women in society: those with good physical features and those with good hearts. This proverb can be used to appreciate women who do not have beautiful physical features but have good hearts, mainly because in modern-day societies, women with good hearts are not appreciated as much as women with good physical features. This proverb is suitable for contexts of appreciation of inner beauty (the proverb is often used to appreciate and value individuals, particularly women, who may not possess conventional physical attractiveness but exhibit admirable inner qualities. It encourages recognising and valuing inner beauty over outward appearances), challenging superficial judgements (in discussions about beauty standards and societal norms, the proverb challenges the superficial judgement of individuals based solely on their physical appearance. It advocates a more holistic appreciation of people based on their character and moral qualities), promoting equity and respect (this proverb may be used in contexts that promote gender equality and respect for women. It suggests that women should be valued not just for their looks but also for their inner strengths and virtues), cultural teachings (within

cultural teachings and storytelling, the proverb serves to impart wisdom about the importance of integrity and inner goodness. It may teach younger generations about values that truly matter in relationships and communities), empowerment and self-worth (it can also be used in empowerment contexts to uplift individuals who may feel marginalised or undervalued due to societal emphasis on physical appearance. The proverb encourages self-worth based on one's character and actions).

Discussion and conclusion

Gender discrimination is still a significant problem in Africa and around the world. This is mainly caused by sociocultural factors from a patriarchal socio-economic system (Olatunji, 2013). According to Van den Berg (1999: 193):

> Silence on women's subordinated status to women and their sexually determined roles is even more remarkable when one considers African philosophers' predilection for extracting from the systematic and critical analysis of proverbs, myths, customs, beliefs, and practice…from their literature; there is no evidence that they have adequately thought about the discrepancy of a communitarian ethos and women's inferior non-egalitarian status and general lack of rights.

However, records show that there was no gender inequality in precolonial Africa. St. Clair (1994) affirms that the Europeans saw women as subordinate to men and their roles as less vital in society and at home. The Europeans brought the idea that men have the decision-making power over the wisdom and the knowledge of building communities (Taiwo, 2010).

This study has demonstrated that women's role was complementary to men's in precolonial Africa. Women were actively involved in the community's social, political and economic affairs. Men and women had different roles to play in the formation and sustainability of the communities. Moreover, neither was superior to the other.

Considering these debates, the current study was conceptualised to unpack the extent to which Setswana proverbs celebrate women's strength, encourage gender equality and promote African feminism. The study's findings indicate that some Setswana proverbs portray women as powerful, independent, caring, tender and loving. The interpretation of these proverbs also depicts matriarchy as a common feature of the Batswana people.

However, the study should not be read as an account sheet that glorifies women's oppression and is oblivious to the continuing socio-political, economic and cultural discrepancies that influence gender dynamics in society. The study shows that there are Setswana oral narratives that promote and uphold the status of women in society.

Many studies have been done on the patriarchal ideologies embedded in African proverbs, but only a few have been done on their feminist aspects. Also, there are differences in how scholars interpret the meaning behind proverbs. This could be the result of numerous ontological and philosophical approaches scholars use to analyse the proverbs. However, this study has also argued that the meaning one deduces from proverbs is influenced by context. Context dictates that a proverb seen as patriarchal in one setting might not be in another.

The proverbial African language is woven around vegetation, animals and natural objects. Most African communities are strongly tied to nature, farming and the physical environment. Consequently, communicative situations among such people are often woven around natural objects, nature, animals and vegetation (Ashipu and Amende, 2013). This explains why women are compared to animals in most Setswana proverbs, as seen in the findings above. In some of the above proverbs, women are compared to dogs, baboons and cows. Setswana proverbs are infused with natural objects and animals so that their meanings can be visualised from living organisms. The use of language in Setswana proverbs is an aural or visual language. Ashipu and Amende (2013) describe a visual language as one that can be held, felt and touched. This argument is corroborated by Finnegan (1970: 390) in the following observation:

> In many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs is especially striking; one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wordings, usually in a metaphorical form. This also emerges in many of their native words translated as 'proverbs' and in their general stress often laid on the significance of speaking in symbolic terms. Indeed, this type of figurative expression is sometimes taken so far as to be almost a whole mode of speech in its own right.

Setswana proverbs use figurative and symbolic language to talk about women, their role at home and in society, and their attributes. Batibo (2016) argues that language is a mirror of culture. Language reflects the cultural experience of a given community.

The study findings have a critical implication for African feminism. According to Biwa (2021), African feminisms express African women's localised, indigenous and postcolonial standpoints. African feminisms examine the heterogeneity, diversity and dynamism of historical, cultural and localised realities central to African women (Nnaemeka, 2004). However, African feminism is not monolithic. It is fluid, rooted in activism, complex and constantly shifting (Biwa, 2021).

The above proverbs depict women as strong and as leaders. At a semantic level, lexical items such as 'strength', 'provider', 'power' and 'leader' carry the nuance of positivity. The above Setswana proverbs prove that Batswana view women as strong, courageous, loving and caring. It is also clear that these proverbs are rooted in African feminisms; they are anti patriarchal oppression, promote equity in the

form of complementary roles rather than conflict between men and women, and promote connectedness of men and women within the African culture without rejecting the African culture.

Masenya (2004) explains that many proverbs seem to go out of their way to serve the patriarchal status quo in which men's interests are always catered for. The things we say about men and women in our society, such as proverbs, folktales and wise sayings, bring about gender differences (Addei and Addei, 2010). Olatunji (2013) argues that some African traditions still consider women delicate, fragile and tender, and men must protect them from harm. Olatunji (2013) further argues that such practices reserved for men oppose the democratic spirits and human and social developments of today's social communities.

This study has demonstrated that not all Setswana proverbs are patriarchal; some embody ideas of African feminism, celebrate women and promote them in society. The studied proverbs encourage gender equality and challenge patriarchal attitudes. These proverbs provide a valuable perspective on African feminism, highlighting the importance of women in society and at home. They show that not all African proverbs are about disregarding women and confining them to domestic chores and caregiving roles.

However, it is vital also to note that proverbs, by their nature, can be contradictory. Some proverbs present opposite advice or perspectives. Mieder (2003) states that glancing at all proverb collections reveals their contradictory nature. However, this is because the meaning of a proverb depends on its function in a given context (Krikmann, 1974). Burke (1941) observes that proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations. Therefore, they are used to generalise, influence or manipulate people, comment on behavioural patterns, satirise societal ills and strengthen accepted beliefs of accepted practical social conduct (Goodwin and Wenzel, 1979). This results in their ambiguous nature and openness to interpretation (Mieder and Dundes, 1994).

It is evident in this study that some proverbs may contradict each other. This is because proverbs originate in diverse societies with varied experiences and worldviews. Contradictions can also arise from proverbs addressing specific situations or roles. Moreover, over time, the interpretations of proverbs might shift, leading to apparent contradictions. The contradictions in proverbs also portray the nature of inconsistencies and contradictions in man (Akanbi, 2020). Akanbi (2020) further notes that African proverbs are not one face but all multifaced. Hence, what seems to be positive always has its negative counterparts.

The findings of this study have significant implications for African gender equality programmes and educational practices. By highlighting the positive representations of women in Setswana proverbs, this research can inform initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and challenging patriarchal attitudes. Educational programmes can incorporate these proverbs to teach values of gender equality and the complementary roles of men and women in society.

Recommendations for future research

1. *Comparative studies*: Future research could compare Setswana proverbs with those of other African cultures to identify common themes and differences in gender representations.
2. *Longitudinal studies*: Investigating how the interpretation of proverbs evolves over time and across generations would provide insights into changing gender dynamics.
3. *Contextual analysis*: More in-depth contextual analysis of proverbs in specific social, economic and political settings could reveal nuanced understandings of their meanings and implications.
4. *Interdisciplinary approaches*: Collaborating with anthropologists, sociologists and linguists could enrich the analysis of proverbs and their impact on gender relations.

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