

Malawi proverbs in Chichewa language: Empowering or disempowering for women/girls

Central Idea: Proverbs can fuel gender imbalance

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SUMMARY:

Proverbs have a profound influence on the empowerment/disempowerment of women in many African countries because they are regarded as “reservoirs of a society’s wisdom”. They are also used in important initiation and religious ceremonies and even included in the curriculum for the teaching of the mainstream Chichewa language.

However, this cultural practice can also have a detrimental influence as research has revealed that more negative proverbs are used in reference to women than to men.

Proverbs are used to tell people what to do, where to be, what to wear, how to act, etc. Proverbs also justify how women should act, so they define the entire society.

How we manipulate languages has an impact on our perceptions.

Sayings such as: “Women are flowers that blossom nicely in the morning but wither and die quickly in the afternoon,” reinforce negative stereotypes that women are inferior and weak.

The interpretation can also be taken in two ways: firstly, men should not trust women and take their actions seriously; and secondly, women are objects whose main role is to bring beauty to the world.

The proverb may also propagate the notion that studying hard at school is a lost cause for girls and that they should concentrate on trivial matters, such as making themselves look nice and attractive, similar to a flower.

This enables disparities in the way genders are treated at school: Girls are more likely to fail to reach their full potential and become less empowered compared to boys.

Other proverbs reinforce the stereotype of women as a subordinated group whose main role in life is to be a domestic servant to their spouse.

These gender insensitive proverbs bring a very negative implication to the education system. Teachers do not interrogate the messages proverbs are communicating to the learners and the negative wisdom about woman and girls is passed onto learners in a silent way, bringing gender inequality in subject choice to students.

If equality is not there, other goals cannot be achieved. MDG Three and EFA will be difficult to reach if these culturally insensitive proverbs remain at the heart of the language.

Conclusions:

A language management programme is needed to eliminate all instances of gender discrimination in the use of proverbs. Proverbs that promote gender equality and sexual parity should be disseminated. The curriculum also needs to be made more gender-sensitive and teachers should receive training to teach in a gender-sensitive manner.

Discussion

Q. When you dig deeper into gender roles and responsibilities of women, where this practice has continued to dominate the social discourse, there has been an acceptance of this by older women in particular. How do women in Malawi feel about this?

A: Malawi women can be enemies of gender equality themselves. Women act as the gatekeepers and women can be guilty of discouraging empowerment. Women are there to stop it. They accept it, but it's because they were socialized to internalize it. I too have been socialized into behaving in a certain way that accepts sexist attitudes towards women. Some women are now trying to say "no" and trying to bring change.

Comment: Proverbs are not the wisdom of the people. They were created by the people of power to create a hegemonic society. We should challenge these cultural assumptions. Proverbs can fuel gender imbalance.

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Key finding:

Many of the proverbs are used as a socialization tool that disempower women through negative stereotypes. However, if proverbs are turned around and the content is changed to promote a positive image of the female gender, they can be used as a catalyst for change to advance a more equitable society.